



Roundtable on reducing foodborne illnesses FSSAI's new food safety step

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An expert's roundtable on Reducing Foodborne Illness: Strengthening Surveillance Capabilities and Epidemiological Investigations was organised at FSSAI recently. The collaboration between the country's apex food regulator and the industry on promoting science-based food safety took another step towards tackling the enormous burden of food-borne illnesses in the country.

In 2016, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with CHIFSS, a partnership initiative on food safety sciences between the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Hindustan Unilever (HUL) to promote science-based food safety.

Foodborne disease burden is a global concern both in terms of human suffering and economic costs. The Foodborne Disease Burden Epidemiology Reference Group (FERG), set up by the World Health Organization (WHO), in its 2015 report, estimated that the global burden of foodborne illnesses in 2010 was 600 million cases worldwide, with 4,20,000 deaths.

The burden in South-East Asia alone (including India) is about 150 million cases and 1,75,000 deaths with India having the highest mortality for children aged below five years' age and an estimated economic burden of foodborne illnesses.

A recent report of the Wageningen University and International Livestock Research Institute estimated that the annual economic costs of foodborne illness were to the tune of \$28 billion.

This roundtable was jointly organised by FSSAI and CHIFSS, and supported by the American Society of Microbiology, with the intention of bringing together relevant stakeholders of the country comprising regulatory bodies, government, research institutes, healthcare professionals, public messaging services and industries on a common platform to address the foodborne illness burden in India, and to develop a roadmap for monitoring and mitigating the disease burden in India.

The meeting was attended by key international and national stakeholders, including the

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Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA and India office, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The technical sessions provided an overview of the current scenario for monitoring and burden of foodborne illnesses in India and international experts shared experiences from other countries.

This was followed by group discussions across three critical pillars: overall burden of foodborne illnesses; outbreaks and epidemics, and enabling mechanisms for management and control of foodborne illnesses.

Each group identified short, medium and long-term action plans which were shared in the concluding session. The output of group discussion will be sharpened into an implementation plan which will be discussed with key stakeholders.

Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI, said that India is moving towards the direction of making a well-developed food network, but still a lot of work is to be done.

He highlighted the presentations from WHO on IHIP and the US experience, including the case studies and gave the attendees very good pointers of what can be achieved through a robust surveillance system like identifying the pathogen, the root cause and issue food recalls.

In order to undertake more effective surveillance and investigation of foodborne illness in India, Agarwal emphasised the importance of connecting the new information technology- (IT) based FSSAI system, the IHIP system and the food testing lab network in a seamless manner.

In this way, the attendees can complete the entire loop of prevention by identifying the cause of the illness right up to the level of the food businesses and undertaking corrective actions and food recalls.

Agarwal also stressed the importance of such a meeting and highlighted the responsibilities shared by each of the stakeholders in achieving the overall agenda of reducing the foodborne illness burden of the country.