To MPE, with love
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Preface

When I was in my teens, one of my favorite writers was Frances Parkinson Keyes. A “romance novelist” who began her writing career as a journalist, Ms. Keyes imbued her stories with a strong sense of place and a believable set of characters, and swept her readers along with a strong and smooth narrative style. Unlike many other authors in the genre, she also prefaced each book with a detailed explanation of its evolution, deftly setting the scene for her “Gentle Readers.” Often, her prefaces were almost as interesting as the novels they introduced. While I can’t hope to match Ms. Keyes’s powers of observation and storytelling, I beg the indulgence of my own Gentle Readers as I sketch in some background to this book.

My involvement in food safety began in mid-1972, when I joined Canada’s Health Protection Branch (HPB). I began my career with HPB in the Winnipeg, Manitoba, regional laboratory and, in mid-1974, moved to the agency’s Quebec regional lab, based in the Montreal area. In 1975, I took over responsibility for managing HPB’s Montreal area microbiology group. The Regent Chocolate Salmonella outbreak described in chapter 4 took place while I was working in Winnipeg, and the investigation into the source of repeated contamination of milk powder production plants with Salmonella (chapter 2) was carried out while I was in Montreal. Many of the details included in the description of both of those events (those not supported by specific literature reference citations) are based on first-hand information.

In 1979 I left HPB and, with my husband, co-founded QA Laboratories (later QA Life Sciences). The description of the wiener processing facility in chapter 2 is based on first-hand information. I was the consultant hired by the company to determine the source of their ongoing post-process contamination program.

In 2003, I wrote a series of articles on food safety for the Del Mar Times, a Del Mar, CA, weekly newspaper. Some of the information and anecdotes that appeared in those articles are scattered through this book. Notably, the
story of Kevin Kowalcyk (chapter 6) and portions of the discussion of the BARF (raw food) diet for companion animals (chapter 15) first appeared in those Del Mar Times articles.

Gentle Readers should keep in mind that science doesn’t stand still. All cumulative totals of outbreaks, cases, etc. are valid as of June 2006. Likewise, statements in the text that relate to ongoing investigations or situations also are effective as of that same date. The continuing saga of U.S.-Japan trade talks aimed at reopening the Japanese market to American beef is an example of a situation that can change from day to day. Also, URLs (web page addresses) cited in the References at the end of each chapter were verified on the dates shown. Given the ephemeral nature of the Internet, these are also subject to change.

What is not—and never should become—subject to change is the responsibility of food producers and processors to put food safety concerns ahead of expediency when making decisions. Choosing to ignore unfavorable or inconvenient test results, opting for the least expensive, most “cost-effective” processing method, and establishing token food safety programs that look good on paper but are ineffective, are not the actions one would wish to associate with major food companies. Yet these choices are made again and again—not just by small food processors, but also by major, multinational food companies. As I write this Preface, Cadbury-Schweppes is facing possible prosecution for its involvement in a U.K. Salmonella outbreak traced to chocolate produced in the company’s Herefordshire production facility. Cadbury’s management waited five months before alerting British health authorities to a leaking pipe that had contaminated some of its chocolate crumb.

A major outbreak of Escherichia coli O157:H7 (183 cases and one death as of September 26, 2006) linked to spinach grown and packaged in the Salinas Valley area of California—unfolding as this book goes to press—is an example of what can happen when an industry chooses to stay with its old habits. Between 1995 and 2005, there were 19 outbreaks of E. coli O157:H7 tied by epidemiological evidence to spinach or lettuce; at least 8 of the outbreaks were traced to Salinas Valley produce. According to newspaper reports, in 2004 and 2005, the FDA advised farmers in California that their crops could become contaminated with E. coli O157:H7. Unfortunately, the growers closed their eyes and ears to the government’s warnings, and are now suffering the consequences—as are the 183 (or more) outbreak victims and their families.

Legislators and regulators also bear a responsibility for improving and maintaining food safety. Notwithstanding industry’s pleas for voluntary programs and self-regulation, government oversight is an essential part of the food safety mosaic. Just as drivers will push the speed limit when they know that they are not being monitored, so too will food processors push the limits of “voluntary compliance”—not maliciously or with intent
to harm the consumer, but simply because it’s human nature to do so. Self-regulation is an oxymoron.

The public, too, has an important role to play. All too often, food preparers and consumers engage in risky behavior—eating raw or undercooked meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood, drinking unpasteurized milk or cider, neglecting proper kitchen sanitation practices, or storing food at an incorrect temperature. Lapses on the part of large food companies can result in massive food-borne disease outbreaks, but these occur only occasionally. Far more common are the sporadic cases and small outbreaks of food-borne disease caused by mishandling of food on the part of food service workers and by individual food preparers in the home.

The need for a safe food supply is not debatable, but experts differ on the best ways to achieve and maintain that goal. Irradiation of raw meats and poultry, the role of microbiological testing, and the precise role that regulatory authorities should play are all areas of controversy. While I have received and considered the opinions of my reviewers, I alone am responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the contents of this book and for any opinions expressed therein.

Phyllis Entis
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