

Stopping food poisoning

Brazos County health department holds classes

By LYNN BLANCO
Battalion Staff
Thirty minutes after Bob ate at a seafood restaurant, he began to get sick. At first he thought he had eaten too much; later it was suspected that he was a victim of toxic food poisoning.

Although no confirmed toxic food poisoning cases have been reported in the Bryan-College Station area since January, contamination by foodhandlers is the major source of food poisoning, said Jillaine Stiller, lab director for Brazos County Health Department. And there are many more unreported cases. Usually people think they have eaten or drunk too much, she said.

Under an old city ordinance, passing a tuberculosis (TB) test and blood tests were needed to establish if a foodhandler is healthy. In January, the City of Bryan passed an ordinance changing these requirements.

People who work in eating or drinking establishments, grocery stores or day care centers now obtain a health card by attending a three-hour class given by the Brazos County Health Department. The course costs \$5 and the health card is good for four years.

It's a more practical and educationally sound idea than the previous requirements, Stiller said, adding that TB tests and blood tests found very little disease in the community. "For example, with the TB test there was never a single case found in more than three years. The blood test we used was for syphilis — which is not a practical way to follow syphilis in the community. You could go out the next day and get both TB and syphilis. And we wouldn't know if you had TB or syphilis for another whole year."

Bob Monroe, a representative for the state health department in Austin, said many other counties in Texas are turning to an educational program like Bryan-College Station's, but he is not sure of the exact number.

"The basis for this change is that the examination of the TB test and venereal disease test has nothing to do with the transmission of these diseases. Instruction for the foodhandlers will often be better protection for the public when educating them (the foodhandlers) in all diseases," he said.

Ann Taylor, health inspector for the Brazos County Health Depart-

ment, helps teach the foodhandler's course three times a month at the Brazos Center.

"Education replacing the needle is a great improvement," she said.

The course stress two areas: how germs grow, live and reproduce, and how to prepare food correctly. Emphasis is also placed on good personal hygiene.

Not all bacteria are harmful, Stiller said. There are 62 common communicable diseases spread by bacteria, of which 40 percent can be spread by food. Salmonella, clostridium perfringens and staphylococcus were stressed as causes for foodborne illnesses in the film strips.

Bacteria grow best when there are warm temperatures, an abundance of moisture, plenty of time for growth, and high-protein food on which to grow. Bacteria can double their population every 15-20 minutes.

Major germ sources are foodhandlers, foods of animal origin and pests that inhabit many establishments, especially roaches in Texas.

Some ways to prevent contamination deal with educating foodhandlers in the importance of good personal cleanliness and being aware of what causes foodborne illnesses, Stiller said.

James Sandel, manager of 3-C Restaurant in Bryan, agrees that this educational program is needed.

"However, the only thing I can see is that attending a class to get a health card is going to be a pain in the you-know-what for my people, but it's going to be a good thing. "I think it's bad that the TB test and blood tests aren't included because lots of things can show up on those tests that you wouldn't want in your restaurant. I think there should be some kind of dual system — both the course and the tests."

Michelle Martin, a student who works at McDonald's restaurant, attended the course Tuesday.

Martin said some of the information was helpful.

"But some of the things that were discussed, I thought were Mickey Mouse — talked about just to take up your time."

She also said that the price is a little high and the only form of reimbursement would be if she claimed it on her income tax form.

Sandel said he would probably reimburse his employees.

"However, I think the state ought to foot the bill completely. We didn't ask for it (the change)."

Martin also had a solution for what she saw as a waste of time the class created:

"It might be easier to hand out an exam (when you apply for a health card) and those who didn't pass it would be required to take the class."

About 500-525 health cards have been issued under the new program. And there have been some problems with health violations.

Not having a health card is the most common violation, said David Jefferson, sanitarian in training for

the Brazos County Health Department.

If a person does not have a health card, the health department cites his employer with a violation. If that business scores less than 60 percent on its inspection report, the business could be shut down.

However he said it's hard to catch a business on this violation because more of these businesses hire students and there is a high turnover rate among student workers.

"Foodhandlers are very transient in this town," said Ruth Maddox, registered sanitarian for Brazos County. "For example, Susy Jane may be cited for a violation in hair restraint one visit. And she may not be there the next time we come to check."

Jefferson said having only four inspectors also created problems. However, they try to visit each business at least once a month or more if it has been cited for many violations.

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