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Introduction and Objectives

Consumer perceptions of food hazards and how the associated risks are managed are likely to be an important determinant of consumer confidence in food safety. A number of studies have analysed consumer perceptions of the risks associated with different food hazards (eg Boholm, 1998; Hansen *et al*, 2003), but less attention has been paid to consumer perceptions of how food hazards are *managed* (Rowe *et al*, in preparation).

Moreover, although it is generally believed that experts think about food risks differently from members of the public (Slovic, 1987, 1992), the implications of this for food risk management practices have not been subject to empirical research. If consumer views of what constitutes effective food risk management practices differ from those of experts, then consumer confidence in the risk analysis process may be undermined.

The objective of this exploratory study is to utilise qualitative research methodologies to identify similarities and differences in the perceptions of, and attitudes to, food risk management practices held by consumers and by experts with an interest in food safety. The results of the qualitative research phase will be used to inform the development of a quantitative survey to model the key determinants of consumer confidence in food risk management practices.

Methodology

Focus groups and follow-up interviews with consumers and experts were conducted in each of five participating EU countries: Denmark, Germany, Greece, Slovenia and the UK.

The expert participants included food safety scientists, food risk assessors and food risk managers from a wide range of backgrounds (including research institutes, regulatory bodies and the food industry). The aim was to ensure a representation of individuals from across the risk analysis process.

A ranking technique was used to stimulate the group discussions. Participants were asked to consider a set of food hazards (as listed opposite) and to rank them according to how well managed they perceived these to be by the responsible authorities. They were also asked if they felt that any of the hazards should be managed differently and, if so, how.

Food Hazards

- pesticide residues
- natural toxins
- genetically modified food crops
- mad cow disease
- food allergy
- inappropriate dietary choice
- food poisoning outbreak

Results

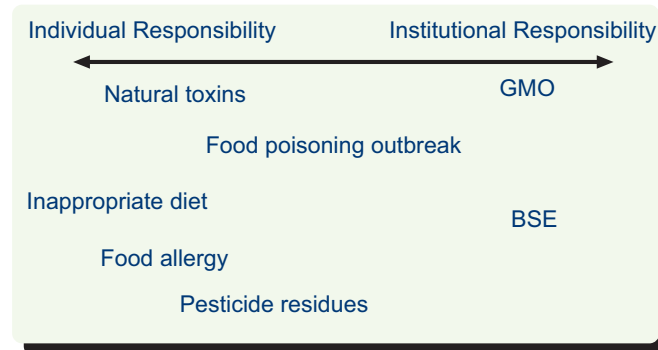
Five key themes were identified as common to the perceptions of both consumers and experts.

Responsibility

The issue of who is responsible for preventing the occurrence of, or dealing with, food risks.

- Experts emphasised the importance of everyone in the food chain taking responsibility for their role in the process of food risk management
- Consumer views were related to the perceived level of control over exposure to the risk:

'I have no influence on genetically modified food but I have influence on how many biscuits I eat.'
(Consumer – Slovenia)



Efforts

The perceived efforts made by the responsible authorities to manage food risks, include:

- The existence of established systems of control

'[As best managed] I've got food poisoning outbreak because I think [...] if there is something that happens, there are mechanisms in place to deal with it.' (Food safety scientist – UK)

- The instigation of preventive measures

'[...] the best kind of control would be preventive, and not afterwards when some twenty people have to be wheeled into hospital out of an old people's home.' (Consumer – Germany)

- The provision of information and education

'My criteria [for ranking as well managed] are, first of all, the degree of informing consumers validly, timely and honestly.' (Food risk manager – Greece)

Priorities

The question of how priorities are established in food risk management. Is consumer health protection prioritised?

- Experts believe it is, consumers are not so sure

'I don't think that anything is managed effectively. Even if there is information, where there are interests and thoughts about interests and money, none of these [food risks] will be managed.' (Consumer – Greece)

Science

The nature of scientific progress and its implications for food risk management:

- For consumers, ideas about “vicious circle” and “constant race”
- For experts, issues related to uncertainty, complexity, emerging or hidden risks

Media

The impact of media attention on food risk management:

- Positive and negative associations:

'I thought, well, the thing handled best is also what has been in the media.'
(Consumer – Denmark)

- Experts blamed media for making consumers unnecessarily worried about food safety

Discussion

In this exploratory study there appears to be some agreement between consumers and experts regarding the minimal requirements for positive evaluations of food risk management practices. However, there are some differences in perceptions that need to be addressed if consumer confidence in food risk management is to be improved. These differences suggest that the following food risk management strategies need to be considered:

- Risk communication that is carefully targeted to consumers' information needs
- Pro-active communication regarding hazard control systems and how they are performing
- Empowerment of consumers in preventing food hazards (where personal precautionary action is possible)
- More public discussion of the values applied to determining risk acceptability
- Increased resource allocation to identify and contain emerging risks

References

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