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Food Safety Matters Every Day

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Protocol – I stand upon the protocol that has been established

I am delighted to have been invited to give the keynote address at today's conference organized by The Bahamas Agricultural Health and Food Safety Authority (BAHFSA) in celebration of World Food Safety Day which has the theme of "Food Safety Matters Every Day".

World Food safety day recognizes that everyone has the right to safe and nutritious food in adequate quantity. The Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization consider food safety to be a public health concern since the consequence of consumption of unsafe food is usually illness derived from food borne intoxications, foodborne infections or chemical contamination of food with heavy metals or organic compounds.

Who among us has not suffered at some time from diarrhea and/or vomiting within hours or a few days of eating food we did not know was unsafe? Some such episodes live in my memory to the extent that I can remember the circumstances, countries and places implicated in my suffering! It is estimated that 1 in 10 people get sick from eating contaminated food and that 420,000 persons die annually from doing so. Children under 5 years of age carry the highest burden of foodborne

diseases that result in deaths of approximately 125,000 children per year.

Outbreaks of foodborne illnesses occur frequently and are increasingly publicized in the national and international media. In the last year alone in The Bahamas we learned about foodborne outbreaks on cruise ships, in a local hotel, from eating locally purchased conch, international alerts issued about possible importation of contaminated Romaine lettuce, corned beef and raw beef to name just a few. Not well publicized and frequently underreported and uninvestigated are *ad hoc* cases of food borne illnesses linked to batches of unsafe food offered for sale in restaurants or by street vendors. Food borne illnesses can vary in severity from mild illness that resolves spontaneously to illness that causes absence from school or work or that requires medical attention and treatment. Outbreaks that occur in settings such as restaurants, hotels and cruise ships can have significant

reputational risks and negative economic impact, especially here in the Bahamas with its vibrant tourism sector.

Using the concept of food safety from “farm to fork”, I will present risks and appropriate actions to be taken at different stages of the food chain:

The first theme of food safety is “ensure it’s safe”

The establishment of BAHFSA is evidence of the commitment of the Bahamian authorities to safety along the entire food chain. It is my understanding that BAHFSA has legislative authority to address food safety and seafood, animal and plant health, through multi-sectoral action, with the aim of ensuring safety at all stages of the production, manufacture and distribution of food. I therefore interpret BAHFSA’s mandate as compatible with the aim of food safety from “farm to fork”

which is rather a broad scope of work requiring effective collaboration among public health, animal health, agriculture and other sectors.

BAHFSA should also seek to ensure that The Bahamas complies with international standards for food products established by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

The second theme of food safety is “Grow it safe”

- During growth, plant crops may become unsafe due to contamination with harmful pesticides or microbes and their products e.g. enteric bacteria and their toxins, parasites or viruses. Some of these organisms occur naturally in soil or water or are found there due to contamination with human or animal faecal wastes. Toxin producing soil microbes include *Clostridium perfringens* and *Bacillus cereus*. Plant growth practices should be protective of the environment, and there is increasing demand for favoring production of climate resilient crops. There are also

consumer concerns about the environmental impact of genetically modified organisms (GMOS) and crops, notwithstanding their potential to increase crop yield, lengthen shelf life and increase resilience against the harmful effect of pests.

- Animal farming presents risks to humans from the occasional occurrence of zoonotic diseases that are transmissible from animals to man (e.g. influenza in poultry production, “mad cow” disease in cattle, Listeria from infected domestic and wild animals). Also harmful is the use of antibiotics in livestock rearing which increases the risk of emergence of antimicrobial resistance that can be transmissible from animal to human pathogens, ultimately leading to decreased efficacy of antibiotics used in human health care.
- The Bahamas has a vibrant fishing industry. Occasional food borne illnesses are associated with intoxication of marine products e.g. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* toxins in conch associated with changes in the marine environment, ciguatera toxins that occur in certain

tropical reef fish and predatory fish like barracuda. There are several foodborne illnesses associated with consuming seafood:

- Did you know that you could have paralysis or lose your memory from toxins in contaminated shellfish?
 - Did you know that toxins from algae can cause fish to die off in large numbers and have a harmful effect on the fishing industry?
 - Or that run off of faecal wastes into coastal water can contaminate seafood causing diseases like Hepatitis A and Norovirus.
 - Let us not forget those unfortunate people who have allergic reactions causing facial swelling and itchiness due to toxins found in shellfish!
- While I am on the subject of seafood, there are also other causes for concern, such as the environmental impact and food insecurity brought about by over-fishing, over consumption of conch, and the negative impact of climate change on marine life.

I return now to the third theme of food safety which is “Keep it safe”

- This requires implementing prevention controls from processing to sale. The Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) programme provides a system that identifies, evaluates and controls hazards which are significant for food safety from primary production to final consumption.
- Good processing, storage and preservation are required to retain foods’ nutritional value and safety and to reduce post-harvest losses. Post harvesting processes such as washing of produce with water inadvertently contaminated with soil or human or animal faeces or storage of meat at inappropriate temperature can introduce human pathogens or make food unfit for consumption due to spoilage. Tracking of production, processing, packaging and distribution according to lot numbers is required for monitoring of food products and is important should there be a need to identify

where in the food chain contamination occurred and for recall of contaminated products.

The fourth theme of food safety is “Check it’s safe”

- Control measures include the testing of commercial food products before release for sale or export. This requires a significant laboratory and administrative infrastructure. Problems arise when test results reveal harmful batches of food after they have already been released for sale or export, leading to the need to issue recall or warning notices to consumers to prevent consumption of harmful food. The International Health Regulations require Member States to send alerts or warning about contaminated food exports to the World Health Organization, similar to the requirement under another reporting system known as the International Food Safety Authorities Network, INFO SAN.

- There is increasing focus on food safety as it relates to nutritional content and risks for noncommunicable diseases. PAHO and WHO are working on public health interventions with manufacturers encouraging them to decrease the sugar and salt content of commercial products and to remove trans-fat from all food production. Another measure is working with manufacturers to ensure that food labels bear nutritional information. Some countries are also introducing warning stickers on the labels of unhealthy foods. Other measures are aimed at reducing childhood obesity include banning of marketing that targets children and banning the use of cartoon characters and the offering of free treats in packages of food to increase their attractiveness to young consumers.

Our fifth theme is “Safe food handling”

- The World Health Organization sets out five keys to safer food handling: keep food preparation areas clean.....separate raw and cooked food.....cook food thoroughly.....keep food at safe temperatures and..... use safe water and raw materials in food preparation.
- ***My personal approach when buying food or dining out is to judge the hygiene of the premises by the availability of clean running water, soap for hand washing, and clean appropriately equipped functional toilet. My thinking is that I cannot expect that food will be prepared and handled safely if the infrastructure for proper hygiene is lacking!!***
- Public health food safety measures involve the training and certifying of food handlers and vendors. I am aware that this is done in The Bahamas by the Ministry of Health. Inspection of restaurants and food vending premises are also done to verify compliance with food handling guidelines and maintenance of a hygienic environment that includes availability of safe running

water, clean working toilets and anti-rodent and anti-vermin programmes. Such inspections can be part of a routine programme or can be undertaken in response to detecting and reporting of cases of gastroenteritis and the suspicion of consumption of commercially prepared unsafe food. In the Bahamas inspections are done by the Ministry of the Environment in consultation with the Ministry of Health.

- Disease surveillance and outbreak investigations can also identify unsafe food by studying food consumption patterns of persons who are ill compared to those who are not or from confirmation of pathogens or toxins through laboratory testing of suspected unsafe food. Many foodborne outbreaks are due to poor food handling practices or represent failures higher up in the food chain. Pathogens associated with unsafe food handling include Salmonella species, Staphylococcus aureus, Rotavirus, Noro virus, Hepatitis A and Hepatitis E viruses.

The sixth and final theme is “Team up for Food Safety”

Assuring food safety requires action by multiple stakeholders – producers, importers, inspectors, laboratory personnel and those responsible for national and international public health. Effective partnerships for food safety are essential for human health. Failure to address food safety can have a significant economic impact due to lost productivity, health care costs and reputational risks to food producers. PAHO and WHO stand ready to provide technical assistance to BAHFSA and to health and environmental agencies to fulfil their mandates. When food is not safe, children cannot learn, adults cannot work, and human development cannot take place.

I thank you for your attention.

