



# Association for Consumer Rights

## Food Safety – Educating the Consumer Conference

### **Conference on Food Safety – *educating the consumer***

A Conference on ***Food safety – educating the consumer*** was organised by the Association for Consumer Rights (ACR) in collaboration with the Embassy of Ireland to Malta on Saturday 18 May at Europa House, Valletta. The Conference was addressed by Hon Helena Dalli, Minister responsible for Consumer Affairs, European and local experts in food safety and the contribution of the general public. Chair Grace Attard, ACR, General Secretary spoke about the importance of education and empowerment of consumers in matters concerning food safety. In Europe, and not least in Malta, the importance of building confidence in citizens is on the increase. The need for Government and the Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (MCCAA) to increase joint efforts in consumer education and protection was raised in the opening remarks of Stefan Xuereb, ACR President. NGOs working in the field of consumer protection need support to build a strong capacity to offer better services to citizens.

In a specifically prepared video message, EU Commissioner Borg responsible for Health and Consumer Affairs gave an overview of the important initiatives aimed at improving the health, safety and confidence of EU citizens. As policymakers, giving a greater sense of empowerment to consumers is crucial for food safety control.

Minister for Consumer Affairs, Hon Helena Dalli, spoke about the EU Year of European Citizens 2013, which aims to strengthen the rights to consumers for goods and services and the voice of NGOs. Minister Dalli stated that a National Strategy for Consumer Education is to be launched very soon. The strategy will highlight policies to provide access to information and education for vulnerable groups like young children, the elderly and persons with disability. Consumers should be IT literate to be able to access more information on food products and also financially literate to be able to budget, save and compare prices. Consumers need to be empowered to report infringements to competent authorities. The Minister also made reference to the recommendations of the ACR to the MCCAA Public Consultation document on Educating the Consumer.

From the EU perspective, Frans Verstraete, an agricultural engineer and Head of Sector "Contaminants and residues of veterinary drugs" EU Commission stated that the EU has developed a system of the most sophisticated and comprehensive standards of food safety in the world. He emphasised that one cannot take the different segments of the agrofood chain in isolation; "This is what we call the "farm to fork" approach, which covers all sectors of the food chain, from seeds and plants, to animal reproductive material, to feed production, primary production, food processing, storage, transport and retail sale" This approach, both in the EU Internal Market and the global market is increasingly providing food safety, through hazard analysis, traceability and effective enforcement, including official controls and action based on the precautionary principle.

Mr Verstraete explained the Commission's public health priorities to promote healthier diets amongst EU citizens. One such initiative is "The High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity", a group of European government representatives seeking European solutions to obesity-related health issues. He emphasised the importance of nutrition programmes in schools including nutrition standards for school meals and the restriction of adverts for children on foods containing salts and sugars. A new legislation on food labeling aiming to ensure mandatory efficient labeling on energy, fats, saturated



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fats, carbohydrates, proteins etc is due in November 2014. Labelling should be accurate, comprehensive and reliable and the mandatory information is to be of an established minimum size. This information should enable consumers to make balanced dietary choices. Effective enforcement is the key for food safety. There should be official controls at all stages of the food chain with continuous improvement based on lessons learnt.

The Irish Ambassador to Malta H.E. Jim Hennessy gave an overview of the Irish Presidency priorities, one of which is strong measures to address issues concerning food safety and the prevention of hazards. He also stated that in the next few years Malta will be entering a new golden age facing new challenges: the anniversary for Valletta in 2016, the EU Presidency in 2017, for which the Maltese government is working within the trio presidency, and Valletta awarded the European City of Culture 2018. He concluded by referring to the strong positive relations that Malta and Ireland have always had.

Mr Raymond Ellard, Director Consumer Protection Division, Food Safety Authority, Ireland, stated that consumers' interests and consumer confidence were important for business and citizens alike. Today's strong global market advertising and global food brands can make it confusing for individuals to realistically make informed choices. Mr Ellard explained how global collaboration – interdependence in the processes of traceability of the different components in the food chain, with the support of business controls can ensure effective consumer protection. He also referred to the Food Safety Authority in Ireland (FSAI) which has continued to develop scientific methods of testing to better guarantee consumer protection. He referred to the horse meat fraud, which was found by a random sampling on meat as part of a programme to check labels by EU. Price pressure makes rogues change the type of meat, beef being three times more expensive than horse meat. Luckily no toxic drugs like phenylbutazone given as injections to horses, was found in the horse meat. Broken trust costs money due to loss of consumer confidence and loss of sales.

During the second session Flavia Zammit, Senior Scientist, MCCA emphasized the need to ensure the authentic origin of food production. In her presentation, she dealt with what food labeling should really mean, the safety standards dealing with food contact materials and the true marketing of food supplements. She explained how consumers can better understand the large amount of information, distinguishing it from advertising.

Doriette Agius and Charlene Vassallo, Senior Officers - Nutrition- Health Promotion Department gave a very effective presentation on a national strategy on helping children and adolescents develop healthy eating habits for life. Following a study on eating habits among boys and girls between 9 and 15, both officers presented the findings making recommendations on healthy eating habits during different parts of the day, highlighting the importance of fruit and vegetables consumption and breast feeding up to the six month stage, with breast feeding supplementing food thereafter. Malta needs to reduce the percentages of overweight and obesity and improve eating habits. This reduces the silent killers of high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes. Healthy eating habits improve growth and development and concentration at school.

Mr Hadrian Bonello from the Environmental Health Directorate, Food Safety Risk Management spoke about the Food Safety Week Campaign 'The four Cs to food safety at home'. In his very practical presentation he highlighted healthy ways on: cleaning during food preparation; separating raw and cooked food to avoid cross contamination and keeping food covered in the fridge; cooking food to a safe temperature to kill micro organisms and when reheating; and fast proper chilling (refrigerating)



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down to the correct temperature ie under 5°C in the fridge or minus 18°C in the freezer and effective thawing .

An exchange of views from the floor raised concerns on products bought on the internet especially in the area of medicine and the effectiveness of current protection measures at national level. Other issues concerned handling of food in food outlets and the authenticity of take away food, control of GMOs, food labeling and the need for more education, information and empowerment at all ages