



DATCP's Jill Ball is the Sherlock Holmes of foodborne illness outbreak

Release Date: June 5, 2013

Contact: Raechelle Cline, 608-224-5005
Jim Dick, Communications Director, 608-224-5020

MADISON – Sleuthing out the source of a foodborne illness outbreak can become quite a mystery worthy of Sherlock Holmes' expertise. But for Jill Ball, food emergency coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) Division of Food Safety, it's all elementary.

Ball's primary function at the department is to coordinate food-specific emergency response. This includes conducting track and trace investigations during foodborne illness outbreaks identified by the agency's epidemiology partners at the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Responding to these emergencies requires someone who can juggle multiple roles and perform many functions.

"During an outbreak response, I play the part of investigator, liaison and planner," Ball says. As an investigator, she works with industry to determine the source of the outbreak and how the adulteration found its way into the food. From there she assists industry in planning their recovery activities, identifying the root cause and working out a plan to eliminate reoccurrence.

She relies on access to valuable resources acquired through strong working relationships with other agencies and industry to make this happen. "I work closely with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) throughout the process to prevent duplication of effort and insure the incident is settled as accurately and quickly as possible," Ball says.

"We all try to prevent food borne illness outbreaks in our communities. It's my responsibility when a food safety systems fails, to assist industry in the timely removal of the adulterated food from commerce," Ball says.

One of Ball's most memorable incidents illustrates the complexities of this type of investigation. Small clusters of E. coli O157:H7 illness broke out in Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin. Initially, a Wisconsin-made meat product was thought to be the culprit, but as the investigation progressed the source turned out to be vastly different.

"We finally traced the illness to 'in-the-shell' hazelnuts sold in bulk from a distributor in California," Ball says. "This incident was interesting because as is often the case, we started out on one path and ended up on an entirely unrelated path; from meat to nuts. This is proof that the usual suspect is not always the culprit".

Many smaller food producers in Wisconsin don't have the resources to respond effectively to a food emergency themselves, so Ball serves as a tremendous asset to them throughout the evaluation, recall and recovery process.

Some might be turned off by the challenges that Ball encounters in her investigations, but she's not deterred.



Jill Ball sleuths out the source of a foodborne illness outbreak to coordinate the appropriate response.

“Once I got a taste for this work, I knew it was what I was meant to do. There’s a certain amount of adrenaline I get when I start investigating,” she says.

Much like Sherlock Holmes, what appears to others as chaos, is to Ball a wealth of useful information with which to solve a mystery.

For more information about food safety in Wisconsin, visit datcp.wi.gov. You can also connect with us on Twitter at twitter.com/widatcp or Facebook at facebook.com/widatcp.

###