

Moves to beat food-tamperers

THE deliberate contamination of food - or "the new terrorism," as it has been dubbed in the US - was largely unknown a decade ago. But in the latter half of the 1980s extortion for political gain, financial betterment, attention or revenge, by tampering with food, drink and drugs, sent shockwaves through the food industry in Europe and the US.

The threat was not merely economic: lives were at stake as well. The new terrorism came into its own in Chicago at the end of 1982 when seven people died after they took extra-strength Tylenol capsules - an over-the-counter medicine for headache - which had been contaminated with potassium cyanide.

Later, the number of reported product-tampering incidents in the US climbed from 120 in 1985 to 1,720 in 1986. Animal-rights activists introduced the idea to the UK in 1984 with the contamination of shampoo with bleach. Later that year, activists claimed they had contaminated confectionary items. Although the Mars scare proved a hoax, the company withdrew 3,000 tons of confectionary and lost sales worth an estimated £15m - and £2.8m in profit.

Since then, there has contin-

Food companies have stepped up security in stores and factories

ued to be a variety of threats in other sectors - in 1989 contamination in the UK reached new levels of menace. Glass in crisps and in baked beans, coleslaw - and even in nappies - razor blades in baby food, weedkiller in grape juice: the threats became steadily more bizarre and dangerous.

Publicity prompted one woman to falsely claim that a Heinz baby dinner had been spiked with a drawing pin. She was fined £100.

In another case, a man was jailed for 60 days for falsely claiming he had found a needle in a jar of banana yoghurt. He had kept up the pretence for nearly a month and sparked off a baby food scare in Ayrshire. He told police he had made up the story to get more attention from his girlfriend.

Few of the leading food companies and supermarkets were left unscathed. Some of the wider-known cases involved Heinz, Cow & Gate, Kraft Foods, Smith Foods, HP Foods, KP Foods.

In the US, within a week of the first poisoning following the tampering with Tylenol,

the authorities in Illinois and Chicago required all over-the-counter drugs to be sold in sealed containers. In 1983, the Federal Anti-Tampering Act came into force.

As the number of "copy-cat" cases increased, packaging manufacturers started demanding the use of "tamper-evident" packaging for food as well as pharmaceutical goods. In the UK, the crime of product contamination was included in the Public Order Act 1986.

After the Mars hoax, the manufacturers developed contingency plans for dealing with future crises and offered to share their experience with other companies. The Home Office set up a special unit to handle contamination crimes.

One way in which companies have tried to stem the problem is with an increased use of tamper-resistant or tamper-evident packaging, designed to stop people contaminating a product or, where product contamination has occurred, to make such interference apparent before consumption.

But such measures carry a cost: it is likely that tamper-evident packaging for food and drink could soon become the norm, costing the industry millions of pounds and forcing up retail prices.

Premier Brands, which in 1988 spent an estimated £500,000 on new tamper-evident packaging for its Chivers Hartley jams, says it has such plans for all its products.

Heinz and Cow & Gate reacted quickly to its own baby food tampering scares by introducing shrink-wrapped plastic sleeves.

In April last year there were 200 reported cases of contaminated baby food. Manufacturers offered a reward of £100,000 for information leading to arrest. At the time of the baby food incidents, Tesco, Asda and Boots, plus several co-operative societies and convenience chain, Circle K, withdrew Heinz and Cow & Gate products.

The larger supermarket chains have sponsored the setting up of the Food Safety Advisory Centre in the wake of last year's food scares. Reading Scientific Services has now extended its help-line throughout Europe for companies with contamination problems.

The larger food businesses have stepped up vigilance and security in stores and factories. They have also set up management crises teams, sent their executives on courses and invested in tamper-evident packaging.

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