

# Food safety no longer a back-burner issue



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While it's usually not best to preface an article with a warning, I feel that I would be negligent not to include one at the start of this piece. If you're an employee of the Regional Health Authority (RHA) or have faith that said organization does an excellent job of maintaining public health here in the Capital region, you may find what follows to be a little distasteful or unappetizing—much like many of the restaurants in the city. That's because, unlike said health authority, I don't have problems criticizing restaurateurs for failing to meet basic health standards and demanding action about it.

Last week, *Edmonton Journal* investigative reporters Karen Kleiss and Charles Rusnell produced a damning series of reports about the RHA's restaurant inspection program that found it to be secretive and extremely lax when it comes to applying health rules to restaurants. Based on a recent report by Alberta Auditor General Fred Dunn, the *Journal* reporters found that "Capital Health closed just five of the region's 3600 restaurants last year" and that "only six restaurants have been prosecuted since 1998 for health violations."

While it takes more than a paragraph or two to summarize the litany of problems with restaurant safety in

the Capital region, the problems with the establishments themselves is to me the lesser problem. After all, ignorance is supposedly bliss, right? But the fact that it took three years after filing freedom of information requests for Kleiss and Rusnell to get access to the evaluations is despicable.

The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIPP) should be a tool that protects information such as personal grades and addresses that governmental and regulatory bodies collect. It shouldn't provide the fig leaf with which the RHA can cover up its failure to adequately and vigorously enforce public health regulations. When it comes to what goes into our body and the chances that by eating at certain restaurants we might put our health at risk, consumers shouldn't be unaware that the establishment they've chosen was cited for eight health violations days before. Ignorance isn't bliss when you're getting rushed to the emergency room to be treated for food poisoning.

What makes Capital Health's unwillingness to release their reports more offensive than it already is is the fact that, in many parts of the country, information regarding health evaluations are made available online. In Toronto and Ontario's Peel region, they've gone even further and instituted their DineSafe program, which requires all establishments to post colour-coded inspection cards at their entrances with check boxes showing how an establishment fared on their last inspection and when exactly that was.

With this system, implemented in at least 50 other cities across North America, green means pass, yellow means conditional pass and red indicates that the establishment has been shut down. When Toronto started the program in 2001, 25 per cent of restaurants didn't pass; by 2004 more than 90 per cent were getting a green card.

Not only does the system show people what they can expect when going into a grocery store or restaurant, but the card system has obviously provided an incentive for establishments to improve sanitation lest they get a yellow card and lose customers.

In light of how well other parts of the country publicize and simplify the process to access their public health evaluations, Capital Health's long struggle to keep their records under wraps is downright pathetic. One can only hope that the public revelation of just how poor a job they're doing at enforcing public health standards shames them into taking improved steps to inform and protect the public.

Since their failings became public knowledge, Capital Health has already promised a website hosting the reviews by early next year, and while the recent closure of International Fare in HUB came about during a scheduled inspection, one can't help but suspect that it was a little bit of a PR move as well. But while these are good early steps, the public shouldn't be satisfied until Capital Health also adopts a scorecard system in which every establishment's results are there for all to see. That way all consumers will have some food for thought before they even sit down and place an order.



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