

I say, again, unequivocally that we don't, nor could we ever, I think, undertake bacteriological testing on every item going through food plants.

Mr. WYDLER. How was it that the DSA came upon this bacteriological count?

Dr. MEHREN. I believe they—I speak from advice and not certain knowledge—I believe DSA regularly, on this kind of product, samples it out and tests it bacteriologically as a standard part of their procurement practice. Basically, I would think, to assure against any contamination in the process of shipment from an inspected plant to their receiving areas.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. In other words, even today you don't make bacteriological tests at the packing plants?

Dr. MEHREN. Not on all of it. We take many bacteriological tests, but we don't, on meat products, sample all of it. We sample on an intermittent basis, designed to give us specified reliability intervals, primarily as a flag, an indicator to check back against plant equipment and processing lines.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. You do that notwithstanding the fact that these dinners do bear the stamp on here "U.S. inspected and passed by Department of Agriculture."

Dr. MEHREN. Yes.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. In other words you are putting your seal of approval on this without thorough inspection which is risky to do.

Dr. MEHREN. We are putting our seal of approval on these without, in all cases, undertaking bacteriological tests. That is true, Mr. Rosenthal. I would advise our people not to undertake bacteriological tests on every item that goes through a food plant.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. Then you should take off your stamp of approval.

Dr. MEHREN. Not at all. I think that is a misconception, Mr. Chairman. High count is not necessarily associated with the processes of preparation or even with the plant. It can come from hands, air, or from a great many other things.

We use it, as I say, on a sample basis primarily to check the adequacy of the conformity of the plant processes to our own sanitation standards.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. I understand that.

Dr. MEHREN. I might also add that a very low bacterial count is not by any means an indicator of acceptable plant or processing lines.

Mr. ROSENTHAL. I understand that. The point I make is this: I, like most consumers, am rather simple minded. And if it says inspected and passed, I think it is OK.

I don't want to know about any problems you have in inspection. I think it is okay. You are lending your good name to something you are really not supervising very thoroughly.

Dr. MEHREN. That is not at all true. If it is USDA inspected and passed, it is totally fit for human consumption at the time that stamp is put on. We can't ever control the handling of products after they depart from the inspection areas in the plants. I think to assume we could do so, is unrealistic.

Mr. WYDLER. You don't know that, do you? Whether it's fit for human consumption when it leaves the plant?