PUBLIC HEALTH

Food and Drug Danger

Congressional debate on new factory inspection law seen as limiting Food and Drug Administration authority, particularly in drug field.

➤ FOODS WE buy at the grocery and medicines we get at the drug store may not be so clean, safe or pure in the future as they have in the recent past.

Our Food and Drug Administration may not be able, in the future, to give us all the protection we want. This lack of protection, if it develops, will come as a result of reduced appropriations and because a law requested by FDA did not go far enough.

FDA asked Congress for a law giving its inspectors clear right to enter and inspect food and drug manufacturing plants, with or without the owner's permission, so that they could see whether the plant was complying with the law and producing safe, clean, pure products.

FDA inspectors had been doing this until a Supreme Court decision last fall, called the Cardiff decision, declared that the law giving this authority was too vague and contradictory to be enforceable.

During the closing days of its last session Congress passed a law which gives this factory inspection right to FDA. But in debate on the floor, a number of members declared the bill did not require showing various kinds of plant and shipping records to the Food and Drug inspectors. These records include prescription files of retail drug stores, formula files, complaint files, shipping records and personnel files.

If manufacturers and the courts follow this interpretation, FDA expects to have a much harder time getting evidence that a particular food or drug is dangerous or worthless, or that a druggist is selling dangerous drugs without prescriptions as required by law.

Examining the personnel file of a drug plant employee may seem unimportant for protection of your health. When you buy medicine for your sick child, you do not care whether the control chemist in the plant that made the medicine is divorced or single or male or female. But you do expect that he knows enough about chemistry and chemical and drug manufacturing to be able to keep good control over the production of the medicine you get for your child or yourself.

FDA is interested in how much education that control chemist has, whether he is only a high school graduate or someone with the necessary advanced training for his important job.

Shipping records can be more important than the average person realizes. Even in the most careful drug manufacturing plant, mistakes can be made in processing one or more batches of a drug. That mistake may not be discovered until the drug has gone onto the shelves of many drugstores and hospital pharmacies throughout the nation.

The mistake may first be discovered only after one or several persons who got the drug have been made seriously ill. Then the wires from FDA headquarters in Washington grow hot with "Stop That Drug" messages.

The normal and quickest way to do it is for the FDA inspector to go immediately into the manufacturing plant, look at the shipping records, and send stop messages to those drug stores or hospitals that got the defective product.

Without the right to see these records, they cannot be sure of quickly tracing all shipments.

Examination of laboratory control records gives FDA inspectors a chance to see whether proper safety precautions are being taken at each stage of manufacture of a food or drug. A mistake of one decimal point in following a drug formula could kill a lot of people.

Since a plant may manufacture several thousand products, the inspector obviously cannot stay around for months waiting to observe their production. Nor does he need to, if he can see plant records showing that formulas are carefully recorded and followed, and that laboratory tests are made of both the ingredients and the finished products to make sure that safety and purity standards are adhered to.

Members of Congress, pressured by trade groups and the rush of adjournment, may not have learned about all these details in the work of the Food and Drug Administration. They may not have known that the Durham-Humphrey law they enacted to cut down large scale illicit sale of barbiturates and other dangerous drugs does not carry inspection authority.

It was assumed when this law was written that FDA had such authority. But the Supreme Court decision took the authority away and the new law, as interpreted by Congressmen, also denies it.

If FDA cannot inspect the files of retail druggists, the only way they can enforce the Durham-Humphrey law is by going into a drug store and trying to buy a prescription item without a prescription.

If they succeed, they may be able to get a court decision that the druggist is violating the law. But they will not be able to back their case with information from the druggist's own records comparing the quantities of the drugs received with those dispensed on prescription, as they have heretofore been authorized by law to do.

Science News Letter, August 22, 1953

• RADIO

Saturday, August 29, 1953, 3:15-3:30 p.m., EDT

"Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, director of Science Service, over the CBS Radio Network. Check your local CBS station.

Dr. Herbert Conway, associate professor of clinical surgery, Cornell University Medical College, and attending surgeon in charge of plastic surgery at the New York Hospital, will discuss "Plastic Surgery."

TECHNOLOGY

New Process Yields Oil Formerly Unrecovered

➤ SOME OF the four billion barrels of crude oil now lying unused underground can be recovered by the new process of burning the oil sands deep under the surface. The heat thins the heavy, previously unrecoverable oil, and then it can be pushed out of the well by air pressure.

The process, called "oil recovery by in-situ combustion," was developed by engineers at the Socony-Vacuum Oil Company research laboratory, Dallas, Tex. Laboratory experiments have shown that less than 15% of the oil is actually consumed by fire. Field tests of the method are now being made in Oklahoma by Carl S. Kuhn and Robert L. Koch, who led the experimental work.

Science News Letter, August 22, 1953

ENTOMOLOGY

Insects Gnaw Away At Summer Crops

➤ FARM LOSSES to insect pests are increasing as grasshoppers, boll weevils, aphids and other six-legged varments gnaw into maturing summer crops.

The boll weevil situation continues serious in the cotton states, reports the U. S. Department of Agriculture. In North Carolina, 68 untreated cotton fields checked for boll weevils showed 100% infestation. Of 176 fields treated against boll weevil, 163 were found to be infested.

Similar reports of high infestation came from other areas of the South.

Grasshopper damage has stepped up in several states. Severe damage to early corn and alfalfa due to grasshoppers is reported from Maryland. Tennessee, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and New Mexico have grasshoppers in dangerous numbers.

In the widely separated potato-growing states of Maine and Washington, aphids are striking at that crop. In two Washington counties, 7,000 acres of late-crop potatoes are threatened by growing aphid populations, while aphids have already gotten out of control on 2,000 acres in the vicinity.

The corn-belt area is feeling the bite of corn rootworms, as adults emerge in large numbers there.

Tobacco pests—flea beetles, hornworms, budworms—are doing their worst to that crop, especially in the Bright Leaf belt around North Carolina.

Science News Letter, August 22, 1953