Reviewer’s report

Title: An outbreak of Salmonella enteritidis phage type 34a infection associated with a Chinese restaurant in Suffolk, United Kingdom.

Version: 1 Date: 27 April 2004

Reviewer: Marc-Alain A Widdowson

Reviewer’s report:

General
This is a well written, clear account of a routine outbreak investigation. The findings, however, do not have any public health implications that are not already known, that eggs are a source of Salmonella Enteriditis infection, and that proper cooking of unpasteurised eggs is important. Phage type 34a may be rare, and as such there is perhaps some interest in documenting an outbreak attributable to it, but this could have been discussed a little further. For instance, since the authors mention that the phage type is associated with travel to Spain… is there any possibility that the eggs came from Spain? Are there any veterinary data to suggest that the phage type is found in British flocks? Another angle of public health importance is why the trace-back was not successful. Does this not speak to a failure of food safety efforts? Some discussion of this would be interesting; was the problem in the restaurant or the supplier? Could any recommendations be made to make sure traceback is more likely to be successful next time? I would think that regulatory agencies would be interested.

The epidemiologic methods seem sound and the conclusions valid, but additional data could make the analysis clearer.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

The total number of patrons who consumed food from the restaurant is not mentioned. This is important, in order to help assess if the cohort with data is representative of the total cohort. In particular the methods would suggest that the cohort with data contains a disproportionate number of cases, compared to the total cohort. If true, this would mean that the risk ratios are biased (probably underestimates).

Correct nomenclature is Salmonella(italics) Enteritidis(no italics)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The point of an a priori hypothesis is a good one especially when analyzing many different food items. However it should be made clear that these egg variables were analysed first. It would also be reassuring to have some data on other food items analysed for completeness' sake, even if to say that there was no evidence that they played a role. There may have been egg in other less obviously
eggy dishes.

Also the addition of a variable ‘food containing egg-fried rice’ would likely support the conclusion of the eggs as the source. At present it is not possible to tell if the 7 persons with illness who did not eat ‘egg fried rice’ did eat ‘special’ or ‘chicken’ fried rice, or whether they were infected from another source.

Tables 1 and 2 could be combined.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No