

# New food safety specialist puts safety at top of the menu

Food safety specialist, Dr Papiso Tshabalala is newly appointed in the Food Safety Initiative (FSI) business unit of the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA). She is on a mission to educate and train food handlers on the proper methods to prevent foodborne illnesses. "In South Africa, foodborne disease outbreaks are a notifiable condition, but reports are sporadic."



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According to the World Health Organization, diarrhoeal diseases are the second leading cause of death in children under five years old. While this can be cured in adults by over-the-counter medicine, most times a 'stomach bug' is one of the most frequent reasons for work absenteeism.

Bacterial, viral and parasitic organisms mostly cause diarrhoeal diseases. These organisms are spread when there is inadequate sanitation and hygiene, when handling food or water.

A significant proportion of diarrhoeal diseases can be prevented. Dr Tshabalala points out that in the Journal of Nutrition, poor hand hygiene is listed as a leading cause for the spread of foodborne illnesses in the food service industry. Outbreaks involving infected food handlers have resulted in many cases and deaths.

## Role and experience

In her new role at FSI, her experience will be valuable in providing FSI and CGCSA members with science-guidance and advice on regulatory matters relating to food hygiene and safety.

She is also a Food Safety Trainer, and has experience training street vendors on hygiene and proper handling of foodstuff. She notes that food contamination can occur through various ways: a food handler being in contact with ill family members, handling raw foods of animal origin not practising proper hygiene and from hands following defecation.

She cites the Food Safety Management study on preventative measures. Washing hands with thoroughly with soap after using the toilet, before handling food and during food preparation (when handling multiple-ingredient foods) minimises contamination. She adds that putting on gloves (changing them as frequently as possible), using hand disinfectant as well as disinfecting work surfaces will reduce the chances of food contamination.

"Food safety education and training is important, not only in the food service industry but also for the mother preparing supper for her family, the high school student preparing lunch for school. Prevention is best and it can be achieved through awareness."

With her passion in food safety, Dr Tshabalala believes that investment in training of food safety personnel forms the foundation and pillars of strong control systems in the food industry.

Dr Tshabalala, who holds a PhD in the discipline of Food Science and Technology, has worked with a variety of organisations including the Food and Beverages Sector Education and Training Authority, the Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry and the Department of Health.

The FSI has three key domains: food safety, nutrition and food-regulatory related matters. The business unit collaborates closely with relevant national authorities, stakeholders and experts in order to provide objective, independent scientific advice to its members, as well as assistance in terms of related regulation. The unit is also involved in risk communication to its members and aims to encourage a high level of consumer protection to enhance consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply.

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