Press Release

FSSAI-Industry initiative to address Reduction of Food Borne illnesses

22nd September, New Delhi:

The FSSAI-industry collaboration on promoting science based food safety took yet another step towards addressing the issue of food borne illnesses with a public lecture on “Reducing Burden of Food-borne Illnesses: Lessons from other Countries” by Dr Henk Bekedem, WHO Representative to India.

Post successful accomplishment with last three lectures, the current and fourth in series, aimed towards sharing & discussing the best experiences of several other countries including western regions, on reducing burden of food borne illnesses. Food-borne diseases are a worldwide problem of great magnitude both in terms of human suffering and economic costs. Despite the growing awareness at national and international level, food-borne diseases continue to remain a significant risk to health and socio-economic development and food safety remains marginalized.

In India the burden of food-borne Diseases is not known as most of them go unrecognized, or unreported or are not investigated and may be visible only if associated with major public health or economic impact. However as per the aggregate analysis of IDSP (Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme) data from 2011-15 food borne outbreaks together with acute diarrheal disease constitute nearly half of all reported outbreaks under IDSP for the period 2011-2016.

Dr. Henk Bekedem began his talk by an apt quote: ‘We are what we eat’. In his presentation, he reflected on the changing landscape and emerging global challenges of food safety, which make the need for strong systems imperative to reduce foodborne illnesses. He urged the need for risk-based approaches, from ‘farm to plate’ and called for enhanced awareness in the communities of the WHO Five keys to Food Safety and hand hygiene, in particular. He emphasized on the importance of investing in social sector initiatives as these have direct linkages with decreasing the burden of foodborne illnesses.

The WHO Representative called for India to work on estimating the disease burden estimation of foodborne illnesses. He also emphasized on greater collaboration between disease surveillance and food safety authorities. He urged the strengthening of foodborne diseases surveillance – event and indicator-based surveillance to detect foodborne events, bolstering indicator-based surveillance and integrating surveillance data for a better understanding of the risks.

Lauding the work and initiatives of FSSAI, Dr. Henk called for stronger partnerships and multisectoral engagement for effective implementation of the necessary regulatory enforcement. He also stressed on behavioral change through education and training of the food suppliers, handlers and the general public.
Drawing the linkages between food borne illnesses and free trade in the food sector, Shri. Bahuguna, Chairperson FSSAI, highlighted that due to globalization the chances of food to get contaminated with harmful microorganisms & chemical contaminants has significantly increased. We need to be more concerned about the life-threatening diseases caused by the food borne pathogens and every effort has to be made to enhance the surveillance of food borne illnesses in India. A strong food borne illness surveillance system combined with quality outbreak investigations is essential to strengthen the food safety network.

Emphasising that India is in the midst of an epidemiological transition, Shri Pawan Agarwal, Chief Executive Officer, FSSAI mentioned that food production and processing industry has undergone a tremendous change in last few decades and this has influenced the nutritional quality of foods available to consumers. This nutritional transition and increased intake of foods high in calories and low intake of fibre rich foods is increasingly exposing the population to risk of developing non-communicable diseases. FSSAI has taken several steps to ensure food safety and improve nutritional quality by way of launching SNF initiatives in all sectors. Despite all these efforts, a lot more needs to be done to improve food safety framework of the country.

The Public lecture was attended 120 stakeholders including eminent Scientists, government officials and professionals from Academia and Industry along with students from related fields. Subsequently, a panel discussion chaired by Shri Ashish Bahuguna, Chairperson, FSSAI deliberated on the key “Key Considerations for Developing the Roadmap for India on Reducing Food-borne Illnesses” and identified priority areas for capability and capacity building across the nation. The panelists discussed about importance of collecting data and using it effectively to make better decisions and focussing on forging partnerships with different sectors. Major lessons learnt were to think out of the box to solve problems and promote healthy food and healthy lifestyle. Importance of behaviour change communication to prevent food borne diseases, and focusing on household food safety norms was also focussed on.