WHO representative to India lectures on reducing food-borne illnesses

Henk Bekedam, World Health Organisation (WHO) representative to India delivered a public lecture titled Reducing Burden of Food-borne Illnesses: Lessons from Other Countries. This was another step towards addressing the issue of food-borne illnesses taken by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)-Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) Initiative on Food Safety Sciences (CHIFFS), who are working in tandem to promote science-based food safety.

It was the fourth in the series of lectures aimed towards sharing and discussing the best experiences of several other countries, including western ones, in reducing the 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 the national and international levels, food-borne diseases continue to remain a significant risk to health and socio-economic development and food safety remains marginalised.

In India, the burden of food-borne diseases is not known, as most of them either go unrecognised or unreported, or are not investigated, and may be visible only if associated with a major public health or economic impact.

However, as per the aggregate analysis of the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) data between 2011 and 2015, food-borne outbreaks, together with acute diarrhoeal disease, constitute nearly
half of all reported outbreaks under IDSP for the period between 2011 and 2016.

Bekedam 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 food-borne 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.

Bekedam laid emphasis on the importance of investing in social sector initiatives, as these have direct linkages with decreasing the burden of food-borne illnesses.

The WHO representative called for India to work on estimating the disease burden estimation of food-borne illnesses.

He also stressed on greater collaboration between disease surveillance and food safety authorities, and urged the strengthening of food-borne disease surveillance – event- and indicator-based surveillance to detect food-borne events, bolstering indicator-based surveillance and integrating surveillance data for a better understanding of the risks.

Lauding the work and initiatives of the country’s apex food regulator, Bekedam called for stronger partnerships and multi-sectoral engagement for effective implementation of the necessary regulatory enforcement. He also stressed on behavioural 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, Ashish Bahuguna, chairperson, FSSAI, highlighted that due to globalisation, the chances of food to get contaminated with harmful micro-organisms and 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,” he said,
adding that a strong food-borne illness surveillance system, combined with quality outbreak investigations, were essential to strengthen the food safety network.

Emphasising that India was in the midst of an epidemiological transition, Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI, mentioned that the food production and processing industry had undergone a tremendous change in the last few decades, and this had 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 safe and nutritious food (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 by 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 Bahuguna deliberated on the 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 focusing on forging partnerships with different sectors.

The major lessons learnt were to think out of the box to solve problems and promote healthy food and healthy lifestyle.

The importance of behavioural change communication to prevent food-borne diseases and household food safety norms were also focused on.