State health ministers take steps to strengthen food safety ecosystem

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Five key decisions were taken to strengthen the food safety ecosystem during the State Health Ministers’ Roundtable, which was also attended by state health secretaries, during the first National Conclave on Food Safety and Nutrition, a two-day meet organised by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in New Delhi recently.

These were related to food hygiene, school curricula, the campaign to reduce the intake of food high in salt, sugar and fat amongst growing children and the promotion of organic food amongst the masses. This was stated by Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI.

Five decisions

He explained that the first decision was to recognise a safe, hygienic and healthy diet, which is the key to preventive healthcare, which has been chosen as first pillar of National Health Policy, 2017.

The state health ministers agreed on improved convergence between the National Health Mission (NHM) and Safe and Nutritious Food (SNF) campaigns initiated by the country’s apex food regulator.

“This would include using funds from NHM to strengthen the food safety systems in the states, integrate the emergency response system under NHM for emergency response to food poisoning and food-borne illnesses and the use of resource books, like Pink Book for SNF@Home, the Yellow Book for SNF@School, Orange Book for SNF@Workplace and so on,” Agarwal said.

He added, “FSSAI has decided to launch sustained campaigns in cities, districts and states under the banner of SNF to develop city-, district- and state-wide ecosystems and declare them Smart Food Cities/Districts/States.”

The second decision was related to school curricula and making food
safety a part of them with due recognition of eating habits, which are formed early in life and difficult to change later.

“The state health ministers agreed that the curricula in schools must include content on food and nutrition to promote healthy eating habits and build awareness amongst citizens, particularly young citizens, and encourage them to use simple methods to test food adulteration and food spoilage through mobile food testing laboratories (food safety on wheels) and food labs in schools and colleges,” said Agarwal.

The third decision was to launch a campaign with special focus on young citizens and school children for limiting energy intake from fat to less than 30 per cent of the total daily calorie intake and eliminate trans-fats completely (i.e. bring down the consumption of trans-fat to less than one per cent of the total calorie intake, reducing the salt consumption to less than 5g per day and limiting the intake of free (added) sugar to less than 10 per cent of the daily total calorie intake by 2022 (India@75).

The fourth decision was to promote and encourage the supply, distribution and retailing of fortified staples in the public distribution system as well as in the open market and work towards the fortification of all refined and packaged edible and all packaged milk with Vitamins A and D to pave the way to make it mandatory in the near future.

And the fifth was to promote organic food and dietary diversification by various measures to integrate the local and regional cuisines. The state health ministers decided that efforts should be made to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables to at least 450-500g per day and moderate the intake of refined carbohydrates.

Further, the state health ministers assured to work towards creating a culture of self-compliance amongst food businesses by helping them build internal capacities, focus on third-party audit, making enforcement transparent, standardised, predictable and fair by adopting a digital compliance platform, encouraging rating and fair competition amongst food businesses.

The states also agreed to strengthen the food safety machinery and food lab system in their respective states. Further, some of them suggested expanding the portfolio of the public distribution system by including more nutritive food and supplying it to masses.

Jagat Prakash Nadda, minister for health and family welfare, participated
in the concluding session, stating that state governments should encourage transparency in enforcement with regards to food safety matters.

He added that the apex food regulator could give the states a direction, but it was upto the state machinery to devise ways to adhere with them and implement them in a more transparent manner.

On the opening day of the conclave, state health secretaries and food safety commissioners reviewed at length the current status of food safety and nutrition in the country and deliberated on the way forward.

Senior officials from the ministries of human resource development (HRD), health and family welfare and women and child development, industry associations, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) and development partners such as Tata Trusts, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and PATH participated.

This was presided over by Preeti Sudan, secretary, health and family welfare, government of India.

Meanwhile, during the Ministers’ Roundtable, a team of researchers from Denmark, which has carried out a rapid assessment of economic costs of food-borne diseases in India, shared its findings.

According to them, in India food-borne diseases imposed a huge economic burden on India. As per their estimates, this would amount to as much as 0.5 per cent of India’s gross domestic product (GDP) or about $28 billion.

Seven resolutions

Also, during the Roundtable, the state health ministers also adopted a joint resolution with a seven-point charter.

These included the following:

• Supporting the development of robust food standards and a code of practices for safe food;
• Creating a positive regulatory environment;
• Establishing a credible and robust national food testing system;
• Addressing micronutrient deficiencies and promoting healthy dietary habits;
• Bringing about a large-scale social and behavioral change in citizens
• Building a culture of self-compliance in food businesses, and
• Developing effective institutions and institutional arrangements backed with competent human resources and adequate financial resources

During the Roundtable, the health minister also released a framework for clean street food hubs and safe and hygienic food festivals.

These two initiatives would help to build capacities of street food vendors and will go a long way to inspire citizens’ trust in unorganised street food vending.

FSSAI’s new-look website, with a focus on its key stakeholders, was also launched on the occasion.