Food Ethics is Everyone’s Business
Graysen Ortega

The recent Listeria cantaloupe outbreak has already sickened over 130 people and killed over 25. Seven lawsuits have been filed against the companies involved and those are just the tip of the iceberg. Each year there are an estimated 48 million cases of foodborne illness in the United States. People expect their food to be safe and the food industry has an ethical responsibility to produce safe and wholesome food. However, many people fail to consider one of the main contributors to millions of cases of foodborne illness every year: themselves.

We hold producers to a standard of excellence and yet many of us don’t consider the importance of food safety in our own kitchens. But safe food handling isn’t something you can turn on and off. It’s a habit that you have to develop and practice every time you cook. Every day, people fail to follow basic food safety guidelines like washing hands with soap and water or cooking meat to the proper temperature. Is eating a few minutes faster really worth the risk of being sickened or even hospitalized? If someone has a foodborne illness they’re at risk for spreading it and causing an outbreak. We all have a responsibility to keep food safe, not just for ourselves but for others as well.

This disconnect between food safety and consumer behavior poses a significant threat to public health. But understanding what goes into our food isn’t always easy. While food producers try to communicate with the public, PETA and organic proponents inaccurately portray modern food production and spread misinformation about commercial agriculture in the media. Modern production methods use scientifically proven safe ways to increase production yield, product quality, safety, and consumer choice, and lower prices for consumers. Everything from pesticides and antibiotics to sweeteners and preservatives must go through rigorous testing and be administered under strict federal guidelines. It’s estimated that in the next 50 years, the world will consume more food than all the food that has ever been eaten in human history. If that’s true, the only way we’ll be able to feed our rapidly growing population is by using scientific, safe, and efficient methods of producing food.

Unfortunately, several dangerous trends are gaining momentum instead because of consumer choice. Raw milk is one of these trends: some claim that unpasteurized milk is more nutritious and safer than pasteurized milk. However, pasteurization kills all disease-causing microorganisms and does not notably change the milk’s nutritional value. The FDA and Centers for Disease Control have web pages giving the facts about raw milk and advising against its consumption. But some believe raw milk is safe because they’ve had no side effects after drinking it. That argument is about as valid as saying seatbelts are unnecessary because you have never had a car accident before. Spreading this false information is unethical because it puts people at risk.
I work at the Texas Tech Center for Food Industry Excellence, and every day I see the research that producers and academics are doing to improve food safety. During an internship in Washington, D.C., I was pleased to see the industry and regulators doing everything in their power to help too. The parties involved might have some disagreements on how to best approach the problems at hand, but they’re all still moving forward to address the increased need for food safety. So I’m concerned that while the food industry takes an active role in pursuing excellence, many advances will be lost until consumers are also better informed. A chain is only as strong as the weakest link and that holds true for the nation’s food supply. Our home kitchens are the weakest link. We each have a moral obligation to protect the public health by adopting a safer and more proactive approach to food safety at home.

Graysen Ortega is a junior Food Science major in the College of Animal Sciences and Natural Resources. He recommends that readers visit foodsafety.org or fightbac.org for more information on food safety.