

Book review

Health and the Food Chain. D. I. Thurnham and T. A. Roberts. London: The Royal Society of Medicine Press Ltd. 2000. £34.95 (Paperback). ISBN 1 85315 453 9

The authors of this 274-page book have embarked on the mammoth and ambitious task of describing the various aspects of this extremely diverse and extensive subject. Not the least of the tasks undertaken by the editors is the assemblage of chapters from experts with such a diverse range of expertise linking the social and physical sciences. Despite the diversity of individual topics and authors the book has been compiled in such a way as to make it comprehensible, with each chapter leading to the next in a logical fashion.

Each chapter in its own right merits praise as a summary of current knowledge related to aspects of the food chain. The book commences well with an extremely readable overview detailing the changes that occurred in food processing during the twentieth century. Other notable chapters include those on adverse reactions and food tolerance, preservation: past present and future, risk communication: factors affecting impact and the chapters detailing the pathogens and toxins resulting in food-borne infection or intoxication. The language and terminology used throughout is such as to make each review accessible to individuals with only a basic scientific foundation. Due to the wealth of topics covered and brevity of each review, several lack, on occasion, the depth for the book to be recommended to undergraduates as anything other than background reading. For others with a more general interest in the area, the book should serve as an enticing and extremely readable overview of the subject. Many of the chapters are substantiated by extensive and up to date reference sections to direct the enthused to pertinent literature to compensate for any lack of detail. One

deficiency throughout is the general lack of future perspective. Each chapter notes the plethora of problems associated with specific areas of the food chain including historic, current and emerging hazards, however, rarely have the authors attempted to comment on potential solutions.

Although topical issues concerned with food safety, including bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE), genetically-modified foods, and food-borne pathogens such as *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 are mentioned on several occasions, only one, genetically-modified crops, is covered in any detail. Indeed, an entire chapter is dedicated to this highly contentious topic. This provides a comprehensive background to the topic including detail, in simplistic terms, of the techniques used for genetic modification. Regrettably, beyond the technical detail the chapter does not represent a balanced account of the current debate. The authors have focused entirely on the utopian potential of the use of such technology whilst the possible downsides fuelling the current debate, which may include the more esoteric motives of companies such as Monsanto to push this technology, are ignored. It is surprising that a book with the title *Health and the Food Chain* did not devote a similar chapter to the equally controversial topic of BSE. If such a chapter had been included no doubt it would have placed greater emphasis than is given elsewhere to the influences which changes in farming practices, such as intensification, have had on health and the food chain. Market forces have driven food producers to modify their practices in such a way as to provide foods at the lowest possible prices, occasionally to the detriment of human health.

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