Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie

Research project IZS VE 02/11

Applying the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to the construction of a risk communication model for institutional healthcare entities involved in food safety. The case of risks related to bivalve shellfish consumption

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Bivalve shellfish are among the fishing industry products most frequently purchased by Italian consumers (ISMEA, 2009) for their organoleptic and nutritional properties. While, shellfish farming is quantitatively and qualitatively the most important economic item in the Italian aquaculture sector (Prioli, 2008), Italy is also the third largest European producer of shellfish (after France and Spain). Located along the Adriatic coast are the oldest, most productive areas, with some 20,184 tons of mainly of clams and mussels being caught per year (ISTAT, 2009). From a healthcare point of view, however, bivalve shellfish can be considered foodstuffs at risk, since they are filter feeders and act as bioaccumulators of pathogens and toxic substances (Cattaneo et al., 2010) and since the consumption and preparation methods. Shellfish are generally eaten raw or undercooked to avoid altering their organoleptic characteristics, exposing consumers not only to chemical risks (heavy metals, toxic substances, algal biotoxins), but also to risks caused by viruses (mainly Norovirus and hepatitis A virus), bacterial (Salmonella spp, Shigella spp, E. coli, Campylobacter spp, Vibrio spp and Aeromonas spp) and parasitic risks (Giardia, Cryptosporidium and Toxoplasma). In 2008, 3% of food-related intoxications with a definite causative agent recorded in European Union countries were due to the consumption of bivalve shellfish. However, this figure is certainly underestimated (EFSA Report, 2010). Extensive consumption of bivalve shellfish and the related health risks therefore prompt the need to develop correct information at national level on the risks deriving from the preparation and consumption of these products.

Following enforcement of the Community "Hygiene Package" regulation in 2004, numerous guidelines have been drawn up in relation to bivalve shellfish. These are, however, chiefly addressed to operators in the shellfish sector and veterinary services and provide practical instructions on supply chain management from the point of view of preventing production risks and harmonising the application of new national regulations. Risk communication information addressed to consumers is still extremely limited, patchy and fragmentary and is often left to the discretion of individual local or regional healthcare directorates.

According to the results of a national consumer survey carried out by IZSVe, shellfish are perceived to be the foodstuffs with the highest risk for health[1]. In order therefore to promote the dissemination of thorough, effective knowledge on the risks related to the consumption of shellfish, the project will pursue a dual objective. On the one hand, it aims to provide consumers with correct, thorough information on shellfish consumption through the dissemination of validated guidelines that are shared by the key stakeholders in the fishing industry. On the other hand, it will aim to promote an innovative, effective risk analysis and communication model to submit to public health entities, particularly the ones involved in the food safety sector. Social analysis tools and methods, based on participatory and interaction strategies, will be applied in order to select targeted information able to facilitate and promote risk communication for consumers through qualified entities such as national healthcare service Departments of Prevention.

[1] National data from the Survey on the perception of food risks, conducted by the SCS7 Observatory, collected in June 2011 using the CATI method. The data are currently being processed and published.