Intercultural Communication, Food Safety and Environmental Health Practice: A Professional Development Model

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Dealing with different language and cultural groups in the food industry is becoming increasingly complex as new settler groups move into food businesses. This project involved the building and implementation of an intercultural communication professional development program for Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) in Victoria. The project highlighted that EHOs are faced with a number of challenges when implementing food safety legislation with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) food businesses. This included working in a regulatory and educative role, balancing food safety requirements with realistic and achievable outcomes, and the need for more evidence-based knowledge about the safety of specific cultural foods and practices. Understanding the cultural traditions, customs and rituals was seen as a high priority to improve the engagement with CALD proprietors. The pedagogical approach adopted for the professional development program proved to be a successful model in enhancing EHOs’ skills in this area. The project showed that a greater sharing of expertise, resources and collaboration on problem solving internally and externally in the local government environment would enhance EHOs’ effectiveness. EHOs recommended that practical strategies for dealing with these issues should also be integrated into tertiary coursework in preparation for industry experience.

Key words: Intercultural Communication; Food Safety; Environmental Health Practice; Professional Development; Minority Groups

Over the last 50 years, Australia’s cultural landscape has altered significantly. Changes to immigration laws, the impact of globalisation, new technology and information systems have resulted in an enormous rise in immigrants from Asia, New Zealand, Europe and more recently Africa. Australians claim more than 250 different ancestries with 400 different languages spoken in homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). The growth in the number of cultural groups has stimulated the availability of a rich diversity of foods for the Australian population. It has been suggested that food has helped Australia to become a multicultural nation and is one of the earliest elements of foreign culture to be accepted into mainstream society (Kovacs & Cropley 1975). It is predicted that the diversity of foods offered within the community will continue to grow, including a greater diversity of cultural groups operating food businesses. Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are authorised officers under the Victorian Food Act 1984 responsible for implementing food laws within their local government areas. The legislation, traditionally based on a set of prescriptive regulations, has recently moved to a
risk management approach, requiring all business owners to develop food safety programs. This change was facilitated by a spate of outbreaks in 1996 and 1997 largely involving Asian cultural groups (Dunn 2002). The increase in cultural diversity among food operators, together with a change in the monitoring of food safety compliance, has presented new challenges in communicating and ensuring food safety standards are met.

**Intercultural Communication, Training and Compliance**

The dominance of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity within Australian culture has meant that undergraduate programs responsible for qualifying EHOs have been traditionally more aligned with Anglo-Celtic based cultural systems and perceptions, particularly in relation to communication practices. Greater recognition regarding the influence of culture in environmental health practice has emerged over recent years. Australian professional accreditation requirements for environmental health undergraduate programs acknowledge the need to take into account the cultural context in which they operate (Australian Institute of Environmental Health 2005). The National Environmental Health Strategy states that ‘Environmental Health programs should take into account the social context of the target community, including cultural factors and may need to contain components addressing different groups’ (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 1999).

Although the difficulties of implementing food safety in multicultural communities are generally recognised, there is scant reference in the environmental health literature to the specific issues and challenges surrounding the implementation of food safety among cultural groups. A study conducted in 2000 that evaluated the implementation of food safety programs in Vietnamese communities identified the need for more resources and the development of intercultural skills among the environmental health workforce to assist in addressing these issues (Dunn 2002).

A key issue identified in many law enforcement agencies is how to develop the necessary skill set for officers to communicate effectively with culturally diverse clients. One of the strategies used worldwide in government and corporate organisations is to provide specialised training for personnel that focuses on intercultural relations. This paper uses Samovar, Porter and McDaniel’s (2007) definition of intercultural as ‘an interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event’. Although there has been an increase in the number of intercultural courses and training in Australia, the United States and some other English-speaking countries, there is disagreement about which approaches are most effective and whether some are counterproductive.

Training based only on creating sensitivity to other cultures risks disengaging law enforcement officers who want assistance to gain compliance from minority groups. Generic programs do not necessarily engage law enforcement officers. For instance, a review of an intercultural program implemented in the Northern Territory for police found that it ‘lacked police-specific information’ (Chan 1997). Chan also points out that the delivery approach of the program is important, with lectures generally an ineffective means to reach police officers. Evaluations of intercultural programs show that experiential learning is a priority. For example an accelerated learning course in Colorado used simulations to engage police with the day-to-day reality of life on the streets in ethnic minority communities. It also involved participants
in trying to speak the language (Young & Novas 1995). Other studies recommend discussion and small case study groups (Hennessy 1993). Training approaches in Australia tend to be generic and have not developed significantly since the 1990s when most courses were initiated. This project was, therefore, aimed to develop an intercultural development model specifically for EHOs.

**Project Overview**

This paper draws on the outcomes from a research and professional development project, funded by the Victorian Department of Human Services. The project was based on a recognised need to improve intercultural communication between EHOs and CALD proprietors to improve food safety outcomes. The project acknowledged the role of EHOs in implementing the Victorian government legislative responsibilities of the Food Act 1984, as well as the educative coregulatory role of working with proprietors to implement food safety plans.

A research component underpinned the development of twelve one-day workshops which were delivered in Melbourne metropolitan and Victorian rural areas during 2004. The project was delivered within a health promotion program planning model to ensure its aims were met and reflected the needs and expectations of the key stakeholders (Hawe, Degeling & Hall 1990). In addition to the funding body, other stakeholders were consulted including environmental health managers, rural and metropolitan EHOs and members from the Special Food Interest Group of the Victorian Division of the Australian Institute of Environmental Health (now Environmental Health Australia).

The project addressed the following questions:

1. What are the issues and challenges for EHOs in implementing food safety with CALD proprietors?

2. What are the key components of an intercultural development program for EHOs that will increase the effectiveness of food safety communication to proprietors?

3. What methods of acquiring intercultural competencies do EHOs consider useful?

4. What are the practical implications of the intercultural program for the work of EHOs?

**Methodology**

The methodology was built on an action research approach that informed the design, delivery and content of the workshops that had implications for future policy and practice. The action research was based on the four steps of observation and inquiry, reflection, planning and action (Coghlan & Brannick 2001). The methodology enabled a cooperative approach between the researchers and EHOs to understand the complexity of the issues from the CALD proprietors’ perspective and find practical solutions to the problems faced by EHOs in implementing food safety with CALD communities (Allison & Turpin 2004). Action research produces longer-term reforms through engaging participants in the process of reflection and monitoring of actions (Kember 2002). This approach involved three stages which are summarised in Table 1, and generated the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data.

The investigation stage informed the development of the workshop. It involved participant observation, a focus group and interviews. A shadowing exercise provided the researcher/facilitators with
insights into the proprietors’ perspective as well as providing data on the cultural approaches adopted by EHOs with CALD proprietors.

The pilot workshop stage assisted in the provision of evaluative comments and suggestions for activities in the final workshop program on intercultural competencies, and provided data on the range and types of issues experienced when implementing food safety amongst CALD proprietors through the completion of a survey by participants at this workshop. The workshop implementation stage involved the collection of both observational data and survey data based on the experiences of participants when dealing with CALD food proprietors.

The selection of participants for each stage of the data collection, with the exception of the professional development workshops, was based on a stratified purposeful sampling strategy (Patton 1990). The workshop participants were EHOs from Victorian municipalities who nominated to attend the workshop, with their manager’s approval. Prior to commencing the data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the Swinburne University of Technology in accordance with National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines.

The ethnographic observations involved observations of intercultural communications between EHOs and proprietors to establish how values, power and control, roles or defences may impact on the interactions (Gold 1997). The focus group used the method described by Hawe, Degeling and Hall (1990) to generate themes to inform the design of the interview schedule. Patton’s (1990) approaches of interview analysis were applied to the interviews and open-ended survey data (Fink 1995). The responses were coded and co-coded by

### Table 1: Summary of data collection stages and methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Participant selection and data collection method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>Participant observations: Ethnographic cultural observations recorded by researchers for 4 X 2 hours of shadowing EHOs visiting CALD proprietors of food premises in four municipalities. Focus group: Focus group members included EHOs, managers from local government public and environmental health units and representatives from the Australian Institute of Environmental Health. They were selected by role and region to provide a broad base of experience on the factors that affect the implementation of food safety with CALD proprietors. The focus groups explored the challenges and issues in implementing food safety. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with six EHOs in metropolitan councils and six by telephone with EHOs from rural and remote municipalities. The interviews explored the themes raised in the focus groups in greater depth and detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot workshop</td>
<td>Survey with open-ended and closed questions completed by the pilot workshop participants. It explored the type and range of issues in food safety implementation with CALD proprietors and provided suggestions for activities, approaches and methods for acquiring intercultural competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop implementation</td>
<td>Observational data recorded during workshops by facilitators. Open-ended and closed questions completed by participants at the conclusion of the one-day program. Survey identified the future challenges, workplace issues, estimates of percentage of CALD proprietors and provided feedback on the program.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
the researchers in collaboration with an academic from the environmental health discipline, to ensure the validity of the identified patterns and themes (Goodwin & Goodwin 1994). Themes from the research were also communicated back to the participants at various stages to assist further the analysis and validity of the findings. Similarly, themes were developed from the survey data from the workshops. The themes identified are presented in the results section and form the basis of the discussion.

**Workshop model**

The Authentic Learning pedagogical approach adopted for the workshop (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino 1999) and use of Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre’s (1975) model of experiential learning meant that participants:

- opted to attend the workshops;
- selected their own goals and set outcomes to achieve;
- were exposed to a number of activities that required them to experiment with and observe situations that were relevant to their professional role in working with CALD food businesses;
- were involved in real-world problems that allowed for review, problem solving, reflection and planning for the implementing of new skills.

The two workshop facilitators were experienced in intercultural theory and practice. Shusta et al. (1995) suggest that trainers should be mixed teams of men and women with some ethnic backgrounds and at least one person from the same cultural background as the majority of the trainees. In this project one facilitator/researcher was a white Anglo-Celtic female and the other was a male of Indian background.

The workshop design was guided by the following principles:

- activities are based on the best available data and evidence, in terms of the need for action in a particular area and sustainable change;
- individuals and communities are empowered through accessing information, skill development, support, advocacy and structural change strategies to develop an understanding of health, wellbeing and illness and the resources necessary to take control of their own lives;
- the influence of gender and culture is explicitly explored in recognition that they lie at the heart of the way in which health beliefs and behaviours are developed and transmitted (adapted from Department of Human Services 2003).

The workshop incorporated evidence-based practice and cultural relativism. Differences and similarities in EHO and proprietor perspectives were explored for the key compliance issues. The workshop integrated culture-specific information, the emotional challenges involved and culture-general skills (Cornett-De Vito & McGlone 2000). The program for EHOs included exploration of an ethno-specific case study based on a model used by one local government agency in implementing food safety with Cantonese heritage proprietors. Specific strategies were developed from intercultural knowledge such as communication techniques and cultural traditions of food preparation to improve achievement of food safety practices. Issues identified during the research interviews were re-enacted, with the facilitators in the role of proprietor and the workshop participants in their professional roles.
Hofstede and Hofstede’s (2005) dimensions of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, and Hofstede and Hofstede’s and Trompenaars and Woolliams’ (2004) dimensions for organisations were used as a framework for reflecting on practices, perceptions and behaviours of both EHOs and food businesses (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007). Perceptual issues such as stereotyping, prejudice and ethnocentrism were challenged as situations arose.

Results and Discussion

Limitations of the project

The professional development approach assumed that improving communication, relationship building and understanding of cultural traditions of food preparation would lead to improved food safety behaviours with CALD proprietors. However, this was not directly evaluated as part of the project. The project outcomes were limited by a lack of data on the backgrounds of proprietors. More data on areas such as literacy levels, ethnic origins, new versus long-term arrivals, work backgrounds and educational backgrounds for both the proprietor and kitchen staff would have been advantageous in providing a broader context from which to interpret behaviours. However, the research phases of the project provided the opportunity to explore some of these issues and to assist in the creation of an authentic learning environment for the workshops.

Workshop Evaluation

A total of 202 EHOs attended the workshop out of an estimated 280 employed in local government. Although attendance was voluntary, EHOs required approval by their managers. One hundred and sixty eight (168) completed feedback sheets at the end of the workshop. Participants indicated that the workshops were stimulating, practically oriented and well structured. On a satisfaction rating scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), 80% gave a very satisfied (4 to 5) rating for gaining an increased understanding of diverse cultures and 78% were very satisfied (4 to 5) with the intercultural communications strategies that were presented. The responses to the workshop design and presentations were particularly high, with 89% finding them very (4 to 5) engaging and interesting. The presenters were ranked highly with 96% finding them very (4 to 5) professional.

Written comments confirmed that participants were engaged as well as challenged, which for some resulted in new insights. A significant learning outcome from the role-plays was the self-reflection and exploration by EHOs of the unintentional consequences of their actions. The EHOs, in their professional roles, responded to real workplace improvisations provided by the facilitators. This was an effective and stimulating learning tool. Participants’ comments showed that they were introduced to new strategies that could be put into practice immediately. The integration of cultural theory with environmental health practice gave them some tools to problem solve the current and future food safety issues with cultural minority groups.

Cultural background of proprietors

For metropolitan EHOs, the perceptions of the cultural heritage of the proprietors from the most frequent to the least frequent cultural group were: Chinese, Vietnamese, Greek, Italian, Asian, Indian, Arabic, Middle Eastern, Lebanese, Thai, Jewish, Turkish, Muslim, African, Japanese, Mediterranean, Afghan, Malay, Philippino, Albanian, Croatian, and Somalian. Fifty six point eight percent (56.8%) of the 81 metropolitan EHOs who provided data estimated that they have 50% or more...
of their clients from CALD backgrounds while only 8.6% of EHOs estimated that they had less than 10% of their clients from CALD backgrounds.

For rural EHOs, the perceptions of the cultural heritage of the proprietors from the most frequent to the least frequent cultural group were: Chinese, Asian, Greek, Italian, Vietnamese, Turkish, Tongan, Thai, Macedonian, Arabic, and Sudanese. Eighty two percent (82%) of the 28 rural EHOs who provided data estimated that they had 10% or less of their clients from CALD backgrounds.

Although the data are based on estimates, over 25 cultural groups were identified as operating food businesses in Victoria, thus supporting the literature which highlights the diversity of cultural groups settled in Australia (Hugo 2001).

**Workshop data: Challenges and issues**

All participants documented a key challenge experienced when working with cultural difference in their municipalities. Respondents were invited to list issues or challenges that were then grouped into themes. Table 2 shows the number of EHOs who selected a theme. A comparison of the themes in metropolitan and rural areas shows that in metropolitan areas the most common challenge for EHOs related to language and communication, in rural areas the most common issue was perceived to be a lack of resources, followed by language and communication. As the challenges were not prioritised by EHOs, assumptions cannot be made about the degree of importance that results from any particular issue on the basis of these data alone. However, it is interesting that language, communication and resources were commonly cited as a key challenge, which has also been highlighted in previous studies in this area (Dunn 2002).

**Communication of food safety to CALD proprietors: Understanding cultural traditions, customs and rituals**

The workshops explored how the scientific basis of food safety used in western cultures built on the microbiological, biochemical and environmental science foundation, was perceived and understood by proprietors from cultural groups that may have different values, perceptions and interpretations of food safety. This was investigated via a series of workshops, held in metropolitan and rural areas across Victoria, which involved over 50 EHOs.

**Table 2: Issues and challenges identified by EHOs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes identified by EHOs</th>
<th>Metropolitan EHOs: Respondents who selected theme</th>
<th>Rural EHOs: Respondents who selected theme</th>
<th>Total respondents who selected theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-wide policies and practices</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing behaviour of proprietors</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs, traditions or rituals</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and communication</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting legislative requirements for food safety</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack or resources</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No challenges</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
environmental, toxic and physical contamination of food does not necessarily have the same meaning in other cultures. For instance, concepts inherent in food safety practice, such as freshness, what is meant by food that is hot or cold, or temperature control and hygiene, could be interpreted differently by minorities.

In some Asian grocery shops there was a view by some EHOs that the shop was cluttered, lacked order and had too much stock stacked up. This was problematic for food safety as it made cleaning difficult and in some cases created a chaotic haphazard streetscape when goods were displayed on the footpath. One EHO who had travelled to Vietnam interpreted the difference in views of shop tidiness and organisation in this way:

More is better. If you have more in your shop you have lots to offer your customers, it is a more successful business. Here it is neat and tidy not junk everywhere. In Vietnam you put junk everywhere. They are not into presentation, you put things up off the floor to keep clean.

Rituals, traditions and customs related to food preparation were linked to observed practices, cultural artefacts and products of proprietors. Methods of cooking or preparing foods were areas for ongoing education, particularly with new settlers. Commonly, EHOs found it an ongoing task to change practices such as defrosting chickens, or preparing or drying fish outside their premises. Cultural differences concerning temperature control of food were raised as common issues with Asian proprietors because of cultural preferences for wet rice noodles, pork rolls and other foods to be at ambient temperatures. Unfamiliar Asian or African foods where the name, contents and preparation process were unknown were particularly challenging. Although the Victorian Department of Human Services had established online resources, such as the Atlas of Ready-to-eat Foods (Department of Human Services 2004), it was argued that this needed constant updating and more detailed information regarding safety risks. Other examples built a deeper understanding of underlying norms and values. For instance, concern about the safety of food offerings in a Buddhist temple raised issues of respect, religious symbols and communication protocols.

For some EHOs who had a more long-term relationship with their proprietors, there was also an appreciation of how family or other pressures were impacting on businesses. This was expressed by an EHO as a

Need to be understanding of the stress/workload involved for proprietors, many [EHOs] have never been on the other side, behind shop to understand what is involved.

Commonly, EHOs found that they had to consider the immediate family or community in order to influence food safety outcomes:

Once you understand a bit of what is going on [in] their lives you can understand what is going on in the shop.

Some EHOs showed an awareness of the importance and extent of family links and networks in some ethnic communities:

The Lebanese have been here for 50 to 60 years and they are from similar villages. It gets back to them if you say something. They have a good network, will tell you what is happening and where.

Some cultural aspects were well understood by EHOs, particularly those they regularly experienced on the job such as Asian proprietors’ propensity for saying ‘yes’ and nodding when in fact they may not have agreed but were being polite. Apart from these more visible behaviours there clearly was little cultural interpretation of the core differences between cultures. The workshop addressed this by skilling EHOs in the use of Hofstede and Hofstede’s and Trompenaars and Woolliams’ dimensions.
as a tool for their work (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007; Trompenaars & Woolliams 2004). Situations were role-played and discussed in which collectivism, individualism, time-orientation, power distance and uncertainty avoidance created different expectations for EHOs and proprietors. There was an identified need by EHOs for more in-depth training in the intercultural field, particularly the application of Hofstede and Hofstede’s and Trompenaars and Woolliams’ work to current contexts.

**Language barriers**

Language barriers were seen by EHOs as the major obstacle to effective implementation of food safety with CALD proprietors. It was extremely difficult to educate and achieve compliance with proprietors who did not speak English. A commonly held view among EHOs was that proprietors often understood a lot more than they pretended to so as to avoid compliance or cooperation. EHOs claimed it was difficult to access interpreters and translated resources. The use of children or other family members or community members as interpreters appeared to be relatively widespread. It was apparent that in most situations there were no guidelines from the council on using family members in this way. Commonly, EHOs preferred to use older children such as tertiary students if possible but admitted that at times younger children were given this task. This ‘accepted’ practice placed EHOs in the unprofessional position of not knowing what is translated to the proprietor or the degree to which the context is understood. It also does not acknowledge the risk it may pose for children if they are asked to adopt a role that is counter-cultural in terms of cultural protocols of respect for family hierarchies. A strong case was made for increased access to interpreters and translated materials.

The experiential intercultural exercises in the workshops explored compliance problems from the perspective of the EHO and the food proprietor. In taking on these roles, EHOs revealed their frustration in situations where they felt unable to get the message across. The facilitators exposed bias in automatically linking compliance issues with difficulty in communication or, in some situations, stigmatising a particular cultural group as non-compliant. There was a general view among EHOs that CALD proprietors did not regard food safety requirements as important. According to EHOs, most proprietors’ main concern was keeping their business viable and looking after their customers, something that was not considered directly related to food safety regulations. A minority of EHOs argued from an assimilationist standpoint. They claimed it was not their responsibility to assist proprietors in overcoming language barriers or to understand their culture. For most, recognition of cultural pluralism led to commitment to the implementation of intercultural strategies more effectively to communicate with CALD proprietors.

Increasing the diversity of officers was considered an important strategy. Most EHOs with an ethnic background found it helped to establish a good rapport with proprietors. This was of particular relevance as often proprietors communicated their experiences with food safety implementation to other members of an ethnic minority. Both positive and negative outcomes were possible when the EHO and proprietor shared a common cultural heritage. While it allowed communication and cultural understanding, some EHOs thought their professionalism could be compromised by an expectation of favours or leniency. Basic language courses for EHOs were suggested as a useful strategy. Another
practical suggestion was to create a data base of the languages spoken currently by EHOs and to establish some protocols for providing a service to EHOs in other councils. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007) recommend that when interacting with people from another culture it is important to attempt to learn some phrases of their language, and to try and seek clarification to avoid cultural insensitivity.

It was also recognised that the perspective of the CALD client was often unknown. In the workshops the EHOs were asked how the proprietor viewed the EHO. Although the responses varied from friend to foe, this was generally acknowledged to be unknown. Some EHOs want professional development that creates a greater awareness of the CALD proprietors’ views on food safety and the role of the EHO. Others expressed an interest in developing their expertise in cultural awareness through observation and exploration of cultural traditions with their CALD clients.

**Gender relations**

A gender shift over the past decade has resulted in the feminisation of the environmental health workforce, with predominantly female graduates being managed by older men in local government (Windsor & Associates 1995). Gender relations between EHOs and proprietors were raised in each of the 12 workshops. Most concerns involved overt challenges to the authority of female EHOs by male proprietors, particularly older CALD men. Examples included refusal of entry into premises or refusal to shake hands or to communicate with female officers. When female and male EHOs visited male CALD proprietors, the women claimed they sometimes found the proprietors communicated exclusively with the male EHO. Patriarchal attitudes by some male proprietors meant that younger competent and more progressive women in the business were not given authority to communicate with EHOs. Often these women were perceived to be more competent in food safety management and more open in communication. Women who had worked in the field for a number of years found gender issues easier to negotiate once longterm relationships were established. Being older and more experienced also helped, although the older women EHOs reflected on similar past experiences. In rurally isolated areas there was concern for the potential of harassment of female EHOs by male proprietors. The solutions proposed for some of these situations further undermined female EHOs’ authority, for example, the most common response was to send a male instead. In other municipalities a team approach was implemented to ensure the safety of women. Although this may produce an interim solution, it highlights the need to develop a capacity to address gendered interactions in environmental health practice.

It was important not to assume that this experience only extended to the interaction with CALD proprietors, in this type of setting. Whether these issues were more prevalent with ethnic minority male proprietors and female EHOs than with Anglo Australian male proprietors was not examined in the research. Sinclair (2005) among others has documented the resistance in many different types of organisational cultures to women in leadership and management positions. Tannen (1990, cited in Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007) suggests that ‘the primary purpose of communication in men is to exert control, independence and enhance status with women’s communication responsive, and men’s communication unresponsive’. These characteristics alone can create potential misunderstanding and conflict between women and men. As these issues apply in a broader context,
further research is required to explore how diversity impacts on female EHOs in dealing with male proprietors.

**Building trust**

Most EHOs found that establishing trust and respect with their CALD proprietors was integrally linked to how they challenged and changed food safety behaviours. Work practices that increased the trustworthiness of officers included keeping to schedules, spending time with the client, sensitivity to the customers, scheduling visits around non-busy times for proprietors, follow-up on issues, openness to feedback, or generally going ‘out of their way’ to help them with food safety or related business problems. EHOs considered that improved trust would result in increased participation by proprietors in questionnaires or other feedback mechanisms without fear of recrimination. One indicator of increased trust was when proprietors initiated contact with them. Although this was a relatively rare occurrence, this kind of trust was shown when proprietors phoned EHOs at work with a query, shared information or voluntarily made contact with an EHO they saw on the street to request information or discuss their food business.

Goldsmith (2005, p. 454) links trust in law enforcement to ‘competence, predictability, fairness and benevolence of officers’. Trust, honour, sincerity and goodwill are also important attributes of good communicators (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007). A minority of EHOs demonstrated stereotypical views of the trustworthiness of cultural groups. In some situations EHOs encouraged proprietors to set their own timelines for improvements such as replacing equipment. When this approach was adopted, proprietors responded by demonstrating their reliability through setting and keeping to tight schedules for implementation of food safety. Trust was recognised as essential if officers were successfully to work through food safety issues and build relationships. The research conclusions are limited by the absence of data on building of trust from the perspective of the CALD food proprietor.

**Training**

Training in food safety was supported as an important strategy for educating proprietors. Finding the most appropriate educational programs and delivery, particularly when dealing with groups from a diversity of cultural backgrounds, challenged local government agencies in Victoria. A number of pilot programs have been undertaken to assist with the development of strategies to address these needs. An evaluation of these programs identified the need for greater communication and intercultural skills among the environmental health workforce (Dunn 2002). For most businesses, reinforcement of expectations for food safety was ongoing. EHOs wanted further development programs on the ingredients and preparation of traditional food items in CALD cultures. Those with more extensive experience with the background cultures of CALD clients wanted more challenging applied programs on cultural difference and communication that enabled resolution of issues with proprietors. The one-day workshop required follow-up with an in-depth development program.

**Management**

Meeting the legislative requirements for food safety was the prime concern for councils. This led to performance measurements based on meeting visitation targets. Typical work schedules had large numbers of visits per week whereby often only a few minutes could be scheduled
with each proprietor. This had particularly
poor implications for EHOs' capacity
to deal adequately with the complexity
of CALD issues. The focus on targets
and a lack in valuing the educative
aspects of food safety led to a significant
number feeling unsupported by their
councils. Professional disempowerment
arose when EHOs were caught between
overt messages to enforce compliance
but at times more covert messages not
to prosecute specific businesses. Some
described this dilemma as being caught
in the middle of political agendas of the
local council, such as not wanting bad
publicity from rate paying proprietors.
Whether these incidents are based on
facts or perceptions is less important than
the predominant sense of lack of clear
leadership and validation of EHOs' work
by senior management as expressed by
EHOs during the workshops. Interestingly,
Windsor and Associates (2005) highlight
how the tensions experienced between
education and enforcement and the lack
of support felt by EHOs from senior
management impact on the capacity of
EHOs to carry out effectively their role.
Several reports into workforce issues in
environmental health practice have raised
issues regarding the shortage of EHOs,
particularly in rural areas, that affects the
achievement of required targets in food
safety inspection (Environmental Health
Service 2004; Queensland Government
Although these reports consider a range of
factors impacting on environmental health
practice such as recruitment and retention
of qualified personnel, the impact of an
increasing diversity of the food community
on practice is relatively unexplored.

Resources
There was a need for new resources,
and coordination across municipalities to
produce additional resources. To inform

Box 1: Resources to support communication
of food safety to CALD proprietors

- Access to professional interpretation
  services for oral and written material
- Basic language courses for EHOs in the
  languages most commonly spoken by
  CALD clients
- Publication of greeting protocols and
  words in different languages
- Establishment of data base of languages
  spoken by EHOs
- Inclusion of languages other than English
  in recruitment selection criteria
- Access to relevant ethnic/cultural
  organisations in Victoria
- Schedule of religious events for year in a
  calendar
- All information and educational materials
to be available in different languages and
in a non-jargon accessible format. This
would include the Food Safety Plan
- Interactive resources that use the new
  technologies
- Data base of intercultural communication
tools and other resources available to
EHOs through the Department of Human
Services or local government
- All tools including written and pictorial aids
to be translated into the language of the
proprietor as well as in English (includes
interactive websites, flowcharts, videos,
posters, brochures)
- Guidelines on how to produce resources
  that work for CALD
- More time spent with individual
  businesses in food safety training
- Resources to assist CALD proprietors in
  accessing information
- Development of culturally oriented
  brochures to explain the role of EHOs to
  CALD food businesses and the services
  provided. Brochures should include other
  local government services provided for
  proprietors. Brochures should be available
  in the main spoken languages of the food
  proprietors in the municipality.

resource production and food safety more
generally, improved access to demographic
data on local cultural diversity was
critical. Although this program pointed
to the dangers of a checklist approach to understanding a new culture, some EHOs still wanted an overview of the main cultural protocols or pointers on behaviours that could be offensive. A ‘pocket-book’ of cultural behaviours of the main food business ethnic groups and the cultural ‘dos and don’ts’, were suggested resources. Although educative tools and resources such as visual charts or pictures or videos were exchanged between officers from different councils during the project, a view developed that there was duplication. Each council was repeating similar work rather than building on existing expertise to move forward. For instance, all councils produced newsletters for proprietors to inform them of changes in the food industry. A list of recommended resources was compiled in the workshops (see Box 1).

The program also initiated the formation of a Special Interest Group of EHOs that followed up on issues identified in the workshops. The group designed a number of strategies that could apply across municipalities including a coordinated approach to addressing the temperature control of Asian noodles from production to delivery. Another significant outcome was the inclusion of an intercultural communication module based on the learnings of the project in Swinburne University’s Bachelor of Health Science (Public and Environmental Health), an undergraduate program for qualifying EHOs.

**Conclusion**

The project was aimed at improving intercultural communication practices of EHOs amongst CALD communities. The pedagogical approach adopted for the workshops appeared to support this aim. The program considered the challenges, tensions and recommendations for change to implement the EHOs’ dual roles of food safety compliance and education. It was built on an action research approach to real-life problems faced by practitioners. The education of proprietors invariably demanded innovation, flexibility and personalised assistance through provision of information, skill development, support and advocacy. In some situations, language barriers, lack of access to professional interpreters or translated materials and resources limited EHOs’ knowledge of culturally specific food practices. A lack of coordination in the development of strategies and resources and problem solving issues that extended across municipal boundaries limited individual councils’ capacity to deal with CALD proprietors. The project highlighted that further work is required to support EHOs in this role, including greater recognition of the complexity of the issues faced when promoting food safety. A better understanding of the CALD proprietors’ perspective through collaborative research models is required. EHOs’ work will also be enhanced through the provision of data on ethnic groups such as languages spoken at home, ancestry, new cultural groups, and work and educational backgrounds. The complexity of factors that impact on the implementation of food safety by EHOs with CALD proprietors will be more effectively met through the acknowledgment of the challenges and provision of training, data and appropriate resources.

**References**


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