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550 Sickened from Quorn Fungus-based Foods

FDA Investigation Moving too Slowly, Says CSPI

WASHINGTON—More than 550 Britons and Americans have reported suffering vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, or anaphylactic shock after eating Quorn, the meat substitute made with vat-grown fungus, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). The foods, which are labeled as “mushroom in origin,” or as belonging to the “mushroom family,” are actually made with a mold called *Fusarium venenatum*—*venenatum* being a Latin word for “filled with venom.” The adverse reaction reports were sent to CSPI via www.QuornComplaints.com.

In a letter to FDA Commissioner Mark McClellan, CSPI urged the agency to order Quorn off the market. Although the FDA has been investigating cases of adverse reactions to Quorn, CSPI said the agency is moving too slowly and is leaving consumers unprotected from a dangerous new food product. CSPI also told the FDA of a telephone survey it had commissioned of 1,000 British consumers which found that almost 5 percent of people who had eaten Quorn products experienced vomiting, hives, or other symptoms. That percentage is higher than the percentage of consumers allergic to peanuts, dairy, and other major food allergens—and much higher than the adverse-reaction rate (1 out of 146,000) claimed by Quorn’s maker, U.K.-based Marlow Foods.

“Many of the people who contacted us experienced such severe symptoms that they needed medical attention, including treatment by family physicians or at hospital emergency rooms,” CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson wrote to McClellan. “One can be certain that CSPI has received reports from only a tiny fraction of consumers sickened by Quorn.”

CSPI also told the agency of Marlow Foods’ plans to market in Europe “mycoscent,” a salt-substitute derived from the same fungus. According to a press release from S. Black, a British food company, mycoscent “imparts a salty taste without adding sodium” and “is easy to use in a very wide

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range of products.” Conceivably, said Jacobson, the company could try to get mycoscent used in virtually any processed food in Britain or in the U.S.

“If this dangerous fungus starts showing up as an anonymous ‘natural flavor’ in foods, even consumers who are trying hard to avoid mycoprotein may get sick,” Jacobson said.

In the past year, CSPI has filed several complaints about the safety and labeling of Quorn. In response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by CSPI, the FDA turned over a company-sponsored double-blind trial which demonstrated that several percent of volunteers experienced gastrointestinal symptoms after eating mycoprotein. Shortly thereafter, CSPI first called for a nationwide recall of Quorn products, but the FDA failed to act.

Marlow Foods is wholly owned by drug giant AstraZeneca, although AstraZeneca is trying to sell it.