

81 diners fall ill after RBG buffet

Salmonella suspected

BY JACQUIE DE ALMEIDA

BURLINGTON ♦ At least 81 people became sick and four were hospitalized after eating tainted food at a Royal Botanical Gardens' buffet on Mother's Day.

Public health officials believe salmonella bacteria is the cause.

And they want to speak to anyone who became ill between May 1 and May 12 after eating at the RBG.

"The fact that so many people got sick means there might have been quite a large infective dose or it may be something about the actual strain (of the bacteria)," said Dr. Bob Nosal, Halton's medical officer of health.

The investigation is continuing, Nosal added.

Caterer Kate Greenland says she has experienced "every restaurateur's worst nightmare" after a long and clean track record.

"What happened is extremely unfortunate. I'm horrified," said Greenland, sole owner of Hamilton's Compton & Greenland Fine Foods and Catering.

RBG: A6

RBG: 'We have the strictest health standards,' caterer says

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"We have the strictest health standards and cleanliness. I am really very, very angry because after 16 years as a caterer and nine years as exclusive caterer to the Royal Botanical Gardens, this has happened," she said.

"When we started getting calls (from sick patrons), we asked the health department for their co-operation and assistance and we have complied with them.

"I have absolutely no idea what caused it and, of course, we're trying to get to the bottom of it.

"I'm calling in a third party to do my own investigation to find out what happened here."

The restaurant continues to operate after being ruled clean and safe by the health department, Greenland said.

None of the food handlers have displayed symptoms, but investigators are taking a close look at how food was prepared.

About 190 people of the 300 who attended the event have been contacted by phone and asked detailed questions about what they ate.

Salmonella causes severe diarrhea, vomiting, fever, nausea, headaches and abdominal pain usually 12 to 36 hours after exposure.

Symptoms can last four to seven days and can lead to severe dehydration.

The elderly, infants and those with weakened immune systems are likely to suffer more severe symptoms.

At least one person has developed septicemia, a form of infection in which the bacteria spreads from the intestines to the blood.

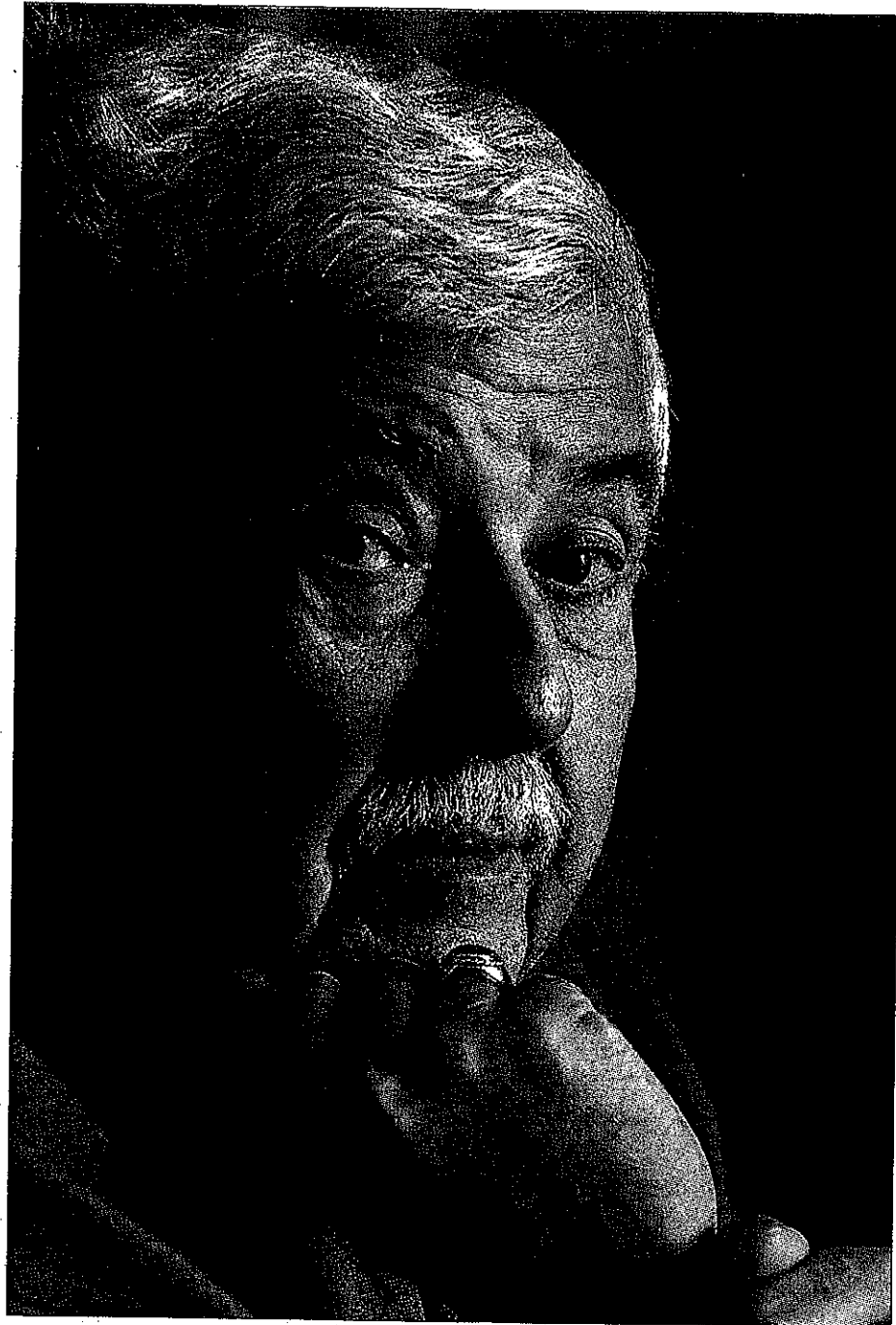
The most common sources of salmonella are meat, poultry, raw milk and raw or undercooked eggs.

And Nosal said he's looking at one particular food item based on results from questioning, but wouldn't say what.

However, one man said he got sick after eating chicken served at the buffet.

Jon Stahl, 51, of St. Catharines was at the event with his wife and four other relatives. Three of them had chicken and all have gotten sick.

Stahl said he is still feeling the effects. He said he started to feel dizzy and had severe stomach cramps three days after the buffet.



Jon Stahl, 51, got sick after eating chicken served at the buffet. And he said he is still feeling the effects.

BARRY GRAY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

He went to a walk-in-clinic but doctors didn't know what was wrong and sent him to the emergency room.

"I thought I was dying. I'm still so weak, I can hardly stand," Stahl said. "I've had salmonella before and thought I had food poisoning."

Stahl said his wife didn't contract the bacteria after eating

the food but now appears to have picked it up from him.

"She's really sick in bed. It started yesterday but now it's really bad," he added.

Nosal said all the food served at the buffet was thrown out the next day.

But some items like cheesecake, horseradish or vinaigrette dressing, were served in the

days leading up to the event and three days after it.

Samples have been sent off to the Ontario Public Health Laboratory in Toronto for testing and preliminary results are expected in the next few days.

Nosal said the concern now is to prevent secondary contamination.

"There exists a risk of passing

the infection to others if these individuals work, while ill, in food preparation, food service, child-care or health-care settings," he said.

Of the 81 people who are sick, 29 are from Hamilton and 16 live in Halton region.

The rest are from the Greater Toronto Area, Niagara, Waterloo, London and Buffalo.

Stahl's son-in-law, Dave Smith, started to feel sick Monday night with severe chills and a bad headache.

By then, he was alone in a cottage north of Huntsville, with no medication to ease his symptoms.

He finally felt well enough to drive home by Wednesday.

'I thought I was dying. I'm still so weak, I can hardly stand'

JON STAHL

About 70 cases of salmonella are reported in Halton every year, but Nosal said many more go unreported. The most common cause is food but it can also be passed from person to person.

RBG officials could not be reached for comment last night.

This region's last major food poisoning incident occurred in June 2003, when 46 people — most of them students of a Milton high school — became ill after attending events at a Mississauga banquet hall.

The outbreak surfaced when dozens of students from E.C. Drury High School in Milton developed nausea, cramps and bloody diarrhea after attending a prom at the hall.

Halton and Peel health officials contacted a total of 400 people who attended the prom and four other events.

It was found to be a strain of E. coli O157:H7, but health officials were not able to determine the source of contamination.

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With files from Joan Walters
and the Toronto Star

RBG food-poisoning toll swells to more than 100

BY PAUL MORSE

More than 100 people are now ill with salmonella poisoning after eating at a Mothers' Day brunch at the Royal Botanical Gardens.

"Six people were hospitalized and three are still in hospital," said Halton region medical officer of health Dr. Bob Nosal yesterday.

Roughly 300 people attended a special brunch at the gardens May 6, health officials say.

Nosal said 106 of the 200 diners contacted so far have reported symptoms consistent with food poisoning, including vomiting, diarrhea, fever and abdominal pain.

Officials still don't know what food contained the bacteria but have ruled out stock foods as the source of the infection.

"We were able to get some samples of prepared and stock items" such as cakes and salads, he said. "These were items that were not out on the buffet but

had been prepared in the kitchen."

Most of the buffet food, prepared by the RBG's exclusive caterer Compton & Greenland Fine Foods Catering of Hamilton, was thrown out after the event.

Health officials are asking all diners to fill out a highly detailed Food Specific Attack Rates questionnaire about what they did or did not eat. Nosal said it'll take two more days to finish analyzing the answers.

"What I can say ... there are a couple of foods, and one in particular, the survey is pointing to," he said.

Salmonella causes severe gastrointestinal illness, usually 12 to 36 hours after exposure. The most common sources of the bacteria are meat, poultry, raw milk and undercooked eggs.

Food continues to be served at the RBG, although inspectors monitored kitchen preparation over the weekend for several weddings.

Nosal said the catering company has a clean food safety record stretching back several years.

"In my 16 years of catering with the Royal Botanical Gardens, we have never had an incident of food-borne illness," said owner Kate Greenland, in a news release yesterday.

Greenland said health officials gave the Royal Botanical Gardens facilities a clean bill of health last Thursday.

RBG officials admit the out-

break could not have come at a worse time for the beleaguered attraction.

"This is our worst nightmare," said acting CEO Steve Oliver.

Even though the gardens is trying to make it clear it employs a catering service, "it still reflects on the RBG, and as such, we are very concerned about it."

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Caterer for RBG faces seven charges

BY NICOLE MacINTYRE

The caterer at the Royal Botanical Gardens is accused of unsafe food handling just a week after dozens of diners fell ill at a Mother's Day buffet.

An inspection on May 15 and 16 found problems with how food was stored, prepared and handled, said Maurice Dickhout, Halton's manager of environmental health.

Seven charges for such offences as improper food temperature and hand-washing have been laid against the caterer, Compton & Greenland, under the Health Protection and Promotion Act.

"They're all things that could lead to problems of food-borne illness," said Dickhout.

Kate Greenland, owner of the catering business, could not be reached for comment yesterday. She said earlier the Mothers' Day outbreak was the first problem they've had in 16 years of catering.

The number of people who fell ill from the salmonella food-poisoning outbreak on May 8 has grown to 150. Eight people were hospitalized, but only one remains in care.

Dickhout said he could not discuss the remaining patient's condition.

Public health officials have spent weeks trying to track down the nearly 300 people who ate the buffet featuring a variety of meats, pastries and salads. Each person has been surveyed to help pinpoint the source of the salmonella.

Early interviews have steered officials to a particular item from the buffet, but Dickhout said they are waiting for more test results to determine the exact cause of illness.

Health officials have been on site at the RBG for nearly two weeks since the first cases of salmonella were reported. The catering staff have been taught how to properly handle food to prevent food poisoning.

"We've got it corrected now," said Dickhout.

The restaurant has been open since the outbreak with public health's approval.

Steve Oliver, acting CEO at the RBG, said staff have been in close contact with public health officials and are "extremely disappointed" with the caterer about the charges.

"We consider this to be very serious," he said.

When it comes to protecting the health of its customers, the RBG's board will consider all its options, including ending its contract with the caterer, Oliver said.

The food-poisoning outbreak is one of the largest Halton has seen.

Salmonella can cause severe diarrhea, vomiting, fever, nausea.

RBG, caterer face lawsuit

BY DANIEL NOLAN

The Royal Botanical Gardens and a caterer are accused of negligence and breach of duty in a \$1-million lawsuit filed on behalf of the 150 people who suffered food poisoning after eating a Mother's Day brunch.

The suit was filed yesterday in Hamilton court by the high-profile law firm of Scarfone Hawkins, which hopes to have it registered as a class action.

A Caledonia man, Douglas Jones, is acting as plaintiff in the suit against the RBG and Compton & Greenland Fine Foods Catering of Hamilton, but lawyer David Thompson said his firm has received calls from about 15 other people interested in legal action since the May 8 incident. It could take about six months to register the suit as a class action.

"I think it does meet the definition of a class-action lawsuit," Thompson said. "Usually, what we're looking for is a common issue ... and if we've got 150 people, it's uneconomical to bring in 150 individual claims."

Caterer Kate Greenland said she was disappointed and "horrified" at the legal action. Scarfone Hawkins has guided many successful class-action suits in recent years, including cases against London Life Insurance, Canada Post and Bell Canada.

Jones, whom Thompson described as a man in his 80s, declined comment about the case and told a Spectator reporter not to call his home again.

Thompson said his client went to the Mother's Day buffet with family members, became "pretty ill" and was laid up for about 10 days.

He said as "a side effect of being laid up," a blood clot developed in the man's leg.

Greenland said nothing like this has happened to her in 16 years in the business, which includes nine years serving and preparing food as the exclusive caterer at the picturesque RBG headquarters in Burlington.

Public health officials have spent weeks trying to track down the estimated 300 people who ate at the buffet in the Royal Botanical Gardens Centre on Plains Road West in Burlington.

The meal featured a variety of meats, salads and pastries. As of the end of last week, 150 had become ill from salmonella bacteria. Eight were hospitalized.

"I've tried to reimburse the lunches of people who were ill, and even parking, but I guess it wasn't enough," said Greenland, adding she has contacted her insurance company about the legal action.

Seven charges under the Health Protection and Promotion Act have also been filed against the caterer following an inspection a week after the buffet. The charges have been laid by the Halton public health department.

Greenland has retained Hamilton lawyer John Grant and plans to fight the charges.

Steve Oliver, acting CEO at the RBG, did not return calls seeking comment.

Greenland acknowledged she's heard comments her days as the RBG caterer may be numbered.

"I have nothing to say about the let-go issue, but I would have stuck by the RBG," she said.

"That's how I would have treated them."

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