

Dine Safe Program would be an improvement for Ottawa

Going to a restaurant at the end of a long day can be a wonderful way to enjoy the evening. But how do you know if the food at the restaurant around the corner is safe?

In Ottawa, you can call the city's health line at 580-6744 during weekday business hours to ask for a report on a particular restaurant or to make a complaint. Avoiding an unsafe restaurant could prevent you from being one of the two million people who get a food-borne illness a year, according to Health Canada.

The city's records state that in 2003 there were 122 health-related complaints against restaurants and four cases of food poisoning. In 2004 there were

108 complaints and two people became ill, and in 2005 there were 90 complaints and no reported cases of food poisoning linked to a restaurant.

Toronto's Dine Safe program has several advantages. Toronto passed a bylaw stating restaurants must display a sign near their entrance showing the customer that the premises passed a health inspection.

The signs are colour-coded, green for a pass, yellow for a conditional pass, and red for a forced closure.

Joe McNamee, from the Ottawa Public Health Office, says restaurants are examined on a regular basis under provincial law. He also says restaurants serving a more complex menu, of several types of meat, are ex-



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amined more often. Provincial regulations state restaurants should be examined once, twice, or three times a year according to their risk assessment. This risk assessment is generally based on the type and volume of food being served and does not necessarily mean the restaurant in question is a danger to public health.

The Toronto program is different because the results are readily available to the public on a searchable Internet database. The database provides recent in-

spection results as well as archives dating back two years.

Ottawa needs a similar system here, allowing customers to check on the health inspection status of restaurants any time of the day or on weekends.

McNamee says that, a few years ago, one of the Ottawa city councillors suggested Ottawa do just that.

Andrew Roche, a health inspector for Ottawa Public Health, says that while Toronto's system does have advantages in accountability, he fears the public does not understand that a restaurant's conditions can change quickly. Therefore a displayed passing green card might no longer be accurate. He also fears that the set-up and maintenance of a website would

take time away from health inspectors who could be spending time inspecting restaurants.

While setting up a website may cost more it is possible increased public access to health records would pressure owners to comply with standards. Also, if an Ottawa website offered recent and archived inspection results like the Toronto site, people would be able to see if a pattern is developing. Thus, a restaurant with a good history would be shown as better than a restaurant that has been cited for minor infractions on several occasions.

With a system like Toronto's, Dine Safe visitors and residents of Ottawa would know their favourite corner restaurant is safe.