16th August 2014

Dear Sirs,

Daily Mail – 2nd August 2014 – Food Waste Caddies

I write regarding the recent article in the *Daily Mail* under the headline "How your slop bucket could poison your family: As MPs recommend we ALL have them, the Mail carries out a scientific test that reveals they can spread salmonella and E.coli through your kitchen". The article, in my view, contains serious breaches of Clause 1 of the Editors Code of Practice.

The article is occasioned by a recommendation from the House of Commons' Environmental Audit Committee that all local authorities should offer their residents a separate food waste collection. It reports a journalist's experience of using what the waste sector refers to as a "kitchen food waste caddy", which the *Mail* prefers to term a "slop bucket". In a food waste collection system, the lidded caddy typically issued alongside a larger lidded container that is stored outdoors, to which the resident can decant the material collected in the caddy.

The article seeks to derive a gloss of "science" through the journalist's use of a device called a "Speedy Breedy", which detects the presence of microbes. The device was used to take measurements both from inside the kitchen caddy and the kitchen worksurface. From the measurements taken, which found microbes in both locations, the *Mail* concludes that the caddy is responsible for spreading dangerous pathogens around the kitchens of those who use them.

The evidence provided in the article cannot support such a claim, and cannot reasonably be described as "scientific". In the scientific method, at the most basic level, the hypothesis (in this case perhaps "kitchen caddies cause an increased level of dangerous microbes in the area surrounding them") would be tested by comparing an experimental scenario with a control scenario, with the aim of testing a single independent variable (in this case, the presence or absence of the caddy), ensuring that other factors remained invariant.

- The *Mail's* "test" therefore did not in any way conform with scientific method, and cannot reasonably be described as "scientific".

As a result, it is entirely misleading to say that the test shows that a kitchen caddy "can spread salmonella and E.coli through your kitchen". It shows only that these microbes were found in a kitchen where a caddy was also present. Whether the quantity of microbes was greater, the same as or fewer than would otherwise be the case remains simply untested; as does whether any microbes were transferred to the worksurface from the caddy or from other sources.

- The *Mail's* "test" therefore did not demonstrate any link between the use of a kitchen caddy and the spread of salmonella and E.coli.

Indeed, it would have been surprising if the test had not found these microbes in the journalist's kitchen. According to the Food Standards Agency, E.coli can be found in raw meat and fresh

produce. They recommend that in order to limit the risk to human health, the following measures should be taken:

- separation between raw and ready to eat foods.
- effective cleaning and disinfection procedures.
- personal hygiene, particularly hand washing, and handling practices.

[See http://multimedia.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/guidance/ecoli-control-cross-contamination-guidance.pdf]

The NHS in Wales provides helpful advice about how to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria through good personal hygiene and keeping work surfaces and utensils clean. They recommend that people wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water, particularly:

- after going to the toilet
- after handling raw food
- before preparing food
- after touching bins
- after touching pets

[See http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/Encyclopaedia/f/article/foodpoisoning/#Causes]

Assuming that the journalist touched the kitchen worksurface, perhaps their hands might have been the source of the microbes? Whatever their source, the normal, recommended methods of food hygiene would presumably still serve as an adequate control against food poisoning.

- The *Mail's* "test" therefore did not demonstrate that a kitchen caddy "could poison your family" unless it is further assumed that readers will not follow normal food hygiene practice.

Indeed, since (if the *Mail* is to be believed) "nearly 7.6 million households — 27 per cent of all homes — already have" separate food waste collections, if there was any significant food poisoning risk associated with kitchen caddies, one would imagine this would have become apparent!

In the course of its article, the newspaper also makes reference to a 2009 trial "including 94,000 homes in 19 council areas". It states that "a quarter of those taking part reported terrible smells and infestations of maggots, flies and rats." Assuming that the study in question is the *Evaluation of the WRAP Separate Food Waste Collection Trials* [http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Evaluation%20of%20the%20WRAP%20FW%20Collection%20Trials%20Update%20June%202009.pdf] the claim is incorrect.

In fact, on page 47 of the document, it is reported that "24% stated that concerns about hygiene, odour or vermin prevented them from participating in the trials" whilst only 6% of those who participated actually experienced such problems. The words "fly", "maggot" and "rat" do not appear in the report.

- The *Mail's* interpretation of the WRAP report is therefore clearly incorrect. In fact, a quarter of those who refused to participate in the trial cited concerns about odours and vermin. Since they did not participate, they did not in fact experience these issues.

The report therefore suggests that fears regarding the "yuck factor" in relation to separate food waste are much exaggerated, when a moment's thought would tell you that there is no reason to think that separating food from other waste should lead it to smell worse or be more prone to vermin than it is when mixed together in a larger bin. Articles such as the subject of my complaint only serve to feed such disproportionate concerns.

The *Mail* should as soon as possible issue a clarification and amend the article to:

- remove any suggestion that the test carried out was "scientific";
- retract any claim of a proven a link between kitchen caddies and the spread of microbes on kitchen surfaces;
- make clear that salmonella and E.coli are commonly found on raw foods, are easily transferred to kitchen surfaces and chopping boards and that good kitchen and personal hygiene is always needed in order to limit the risk of food poisoning; and
- correct its misleading interpretation of the WRAP food waste trial.

Food waste makes up almost 20% of household waste by weight. If sent to landfill, as it breaks down it produces methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. It is also costly to dispose of it in this way. If collected separately from other waste, food waste can be treated more cheaply through a process called anaerobic digestion, which yields compost along with biogas, which can be used in place of natural gas. The recommendation from the Environmental Audit Committee is therefore a rational response to an important waste policy issue, and it is to be hoped that the *Mail's* scaremongering in no way deters action.

I look forward to being able to resolve this matter speedily,

Yours sincerely

Peter Jones