

General Secretary's Report



Hello to you all. Allow me to introduce myself, for the benefit of those who do not already know me. I am a practicing, dual qualified inspector who qualified some ten years ago, living and working in glorious Gloucestershire. Prior to turning to meat inspection, I was working in the industry as a butcher, and have worked in both catering and retail, including managing shops. I started in the Association simply by attending divisional meetings and seminars, then becoming South West divisional secretary and sitting on the National Council. I accepted the position of General Secretary at the 2006 annual general meeting and have since aspired to follow the examples set by my predecessors.

My first task is to sincerely thank Pierce Furlong for his long and valued service to the Association over many years, particularly in his role as Chief Executive. His decision to step down from the role leaves a rather large hole that is going to be very hard to fill, as he did so much on behalf of the AMI that would not be immediately apparent. He is going to be a very hard act to follow, although he has assured me that he will be available for advice and comment when I need it.

Thanks again Pierce; just make sure your handset remains fully charged.

Since the last issue, the integrity of some inspectors has been called into question by a BBC Wales programme; a Week In Week Out special pointing accusatory fingers at MHI's during covert filming in some Welsh plants. That they found "some " contamination is not in question, but I found it very interesting that they offered absolutely no clue as to what percentage of contamination they found, or even an indication as to frequency!!! Nor did it give an account of line speed or the numbers of inspectors on the line, especially as we have just seen the numbers of inspectors drastically cut in some plants. As we all know, where a job is reliant on people, just occasionally human error creeps in. Unfortunate, but a fact of life. This programme gave the impression that faecal contamination reaching the cutting rooms is a common occurrence to the point of complacency. Obviously this is not the case, and every inspector that I have the privilege to know, works to the standard of what they would be prepared to eat themselves. I agree with the comment that any insinuation as to otherwise is insulting to ninety-nine percent of inspectors.

As I was quite reminded myself (not that it was necessary), meat inspectors are quite a unique band of individuals, carrying on a profession that many people are not actually aware exists, and certainly don't want to think about, often in conditions that an awful lot of other folk would not even contemplate working in. Inspectors often have to contend with high line speeds and have to make instant judgements, all the time remaining consistent, impartial and working to the best hygiene practices.

Again, as I was reminded, Meat Hygiene Inspectors could, and indeed should, take a great deal of pride in the work that they do.

This last point leads me to comment that I believe that the recent decision taken by inspectors who are members of UNISON to call for strike action would in no way have been taken lightly. We have all recognised the needs for improved efficiencies within the Meat Hygiene Service, with the Association having offered their full backing to a Transformed Meat Hygiene Service. But I also believe that all inspectors already recognise the need for the degree of flexibility that makes this industry tick. It has always been the case that our trade can be affected by the fact that it is seasonal, and occasionally prone to times of glut and times of scarcity, and that working patterns have to be adjusted to suit. But surely even the humble meat inspector is entitled to have a reasonable idea of his working patterns from one week to the next, and the degree of security that being in a full time position, as a fully qualified professional should bring?

Morale is already perilously low amongst many inspectors. This is patently obvious from the good folks that give me feedback from other parts of the country and I urge the people involved in making these management decisions to acknowledge the professionalism of the MHI, together with the current degree of flexibility and the need for ALL inspectors to be able to achieve a satisfactory work/life balance. By the time this goes to press, it is possible that this issue has been resolved. I sincerely hope that it has, with the minimum of personal sacrifice for Inspectors and loss of goodwill from industry. My respects go out to all those who are prepared to stand up and be counted.

It was with much dismay that I heard the news that the last Seminar had had to be cancelled. I know just how much effort goes in to putting this event on each year, and last September's line up of speakers looked to be something a little bit special. As one "old school" inspector commented to me; "this looks like a line up for the Inspector". This was no accident!!! Previous comments from delegates had been heard, listened to and acted upon. The Trust had made conscious efforts to minimize the often boring legislative side and introduce more current, topical subjects, together with one or two that would have been more for interest purposes, although still relevant. For instance; the proposed talk on Rabies. I was particularly looking forward to that one myself. If the Trust decides that Seminar is a viable option again next year, I will seek to follow a similar agenda once again. To this end, I invite anybody who has any ideas for subjects /topics/speakers at Seminar to drop me line. I will then take these ideas to Trust and present them on your behalf. It is your Seminar; this is your opportunity to have some input into it. My number and e-mail address are on the cover.

This being the last issue of Meat Hygienist for 2008, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued support over the last twelve months and to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a very happy New Year.

Regards,

Ian Robinson