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**Issues in food handling practices and hygienic conditions of restaurants located within the area of the Colombo Municipal Council, Sri Lanka**

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Food borne disease outbreaks have been identified as one of the major problems in developing countries. The risk of occurrence of food borne illnesses is high with the foods served in restaurants. The main objective of this study was to identify the current food handling practices and hygienic conditions of restaurants located in the area of the Colombo Municipal Council. Data were collected from 225 restaurants. Selection of restaurants was based on the stratified random sampling technique. The sample included small and medium scale fast food restaurants which had kitchens for preparing food. Face to face interviews with the employees and an observation check list were used to collect data. Results showed that approximately 75% of the restaurants had unsatisfactory levels of storage conditions, personal hygiene and food preparation practices. More than 60% of the restaurants showed cross contaminations and unsatisfactory levels of temperature control in food processing, waste disposal procedures, pests and rodent control, and hygienic conditions. Reasons for above unsatisfactory levels on food handling practices and hygienic conditions were identified as poor knowledge (87%) and attitude of the employees on food hygiene and lack of interest shown by the owners of restaurants. Moreover, lack of space in kitchens and high costs involved with the implementation of hygienic facilities in the restaurants were the other reasons. The study concluded that 76% of the sample restaurants in the Colombo Municipal Council area had unsatisfactory food handling practices, which could lead to a high risk in the occurrence of food borne illnesses.

Keywords: Food, restaurants, food processing, hygiene, food borne illnesses