

Cleaning up their acts; Bay State restaurants working to avoid health scares

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A hepatitis A scare last summer is providing an expensive lesson to Friendly's Ice Cream Corp.

The company plans to pay \$200 each to up to 3,000 people who stood in line, some for hours, for shots to protect them from the disease after eating at an Arlington Friendly's.

The payments to settle a class-action lawsuit could add up to \$645,000, including lawyers fees.

"I think it sends a message that companies have to train their employees properly in food handling and supervision," said Steven Sabra, a lawyer representing customers in the suit.

Friendly's closed the location and sold the building after suffering through rounds of bad publicity.

It was a rough summer for restaurants. Several were closed or patrons were asked to get shots after reports of employees carrying the disease.

Only one, Rick's Deli, of Marshfield, was implicated in an actual outbreak. Although the state Department of Health never identified a sick restaurant worker, a case study showed that the vast majority of the 32 ill people had the deli in common.

The eatery has since been closed.

Others escaped the health scare unscathed and are still operating today.

"The number one key to survival is to be able to isolate the cause fairly quickly and to demonstrate that the vulnerability has been totally eliminated," said Clark Wolf, chief of restaurant consulting firm Clark Wolf Co. "There can be no question in people's minds that something profound has happened."

The restaurant executives and staff must also be very open about what has happened and what has been done to fix it, he said.

"The public does accept that disease sometimes happens," he said. "But if it comes from general practices that haven't been changed, there's no way to overcome that."

Indeed, the Arlington Friendly's compounded its troubles when health inspectors found numerous violations following the disease scare.

A Quiznos Sub shop in Boston, which quickly closed after a report that a worker had hepatitis A, worked with state officials. Although the company still faces a class-action lawsuit, the shop is still in operation.

Hepatitis A, a viral disease, is spread as a result of fecal contamination. It can be transmitted through food preparation if workers fail to wash their hands properly and don't use gloves.

The difficulty in tracking the disease is that the peak risk for infection is in the two weeks before the carrier experiences symptoms.

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It causes swelling of the liver. Symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea and jaundice.

The disease is most commonly found in such places as prisons or homeless shelters. The highly publicized reports of sick restaurant workers last year had more to do with a general increase in the disease rather than lax standards, said Dr. Alfred DeMaria, the state director of communicable disease control.

Whenever there is a report, state officials inspect the restaurant and assess the potential exposure of customers. The decision is then made about whether to offer preventative shots.

The reports have put the industry on high alert and raised the awareness for the need to take basic precautions, said Peter G. Christie, chief executive of the Massachusetts Restaurant Association.

"The risk in the food service industry is that if it's not handled properly, it would be very easy to have an outbreak and make a lot of people sick," he said. "I think our publicizing of it has helped."

The association has been open in talking about the disease and necessary precautions. It even has information posted prominently on its Web site.

"Restaurants can't prevent hepatitis A," Christie said. "All we can do is help control it."

Caption: INDIGESTION: A Quiznos Sub shop, on Summer Street in Boston, quickly closed last summer after a report that a worker had hepatitis A. Despite working with the state, and the fact that the eatery remains open, the company still faces a class-action lawsuit. Staff photos by Michael Seamans

Caption: COSTLY: Friendly's Ice Cream Corp. closed and sold an Arlington location after a hepatitis A scare last summer led to a class-action lawsuit. The eatery chain plans to pay \$200 each to 3,000 people who stood in line for shots to protect them for the viral disease after eating at the restaurant.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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