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FDA Denied Additional Manpower

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WASHINGTON — In spite of successive scares from mercury in fish, dangerous chemicals in chicken and eggs and biological poisons in canned soup, the White House will not let the food and drug administration beef up its field inspection force.

Dr. Charles Edwards, head of the FDA, would like five or six times the 250 inspectors he now has to handle the giant job of policing the \$130 billion food industry.

But the White House's Office of Management and Budget would allow only enough to hire about 60 more men in the FDA budget request for 1972.

Underfinanced and undermanned, the agency cannot cope with crises like the one that followed a Westchester County, N.Y., man's death from eating canned vichyssoise that contained botulinus poison.

Every time it throws part of its scanty forces into an effort like the current one to round up canned goods from the Bon Vivant plant in Newark, N.J., the source of the deadly soup, it has to let hundreds of other plants go unchecked.

Edwards told a house subcommittee recently that, because of the Bon Vivant roundup, there are at least 2,300 other food processing plants that will not be inspected this year.

The FDA had hoped that the Newark company itself and the National Canners Association would help it round up the estimated one million cans of Bon Vivant-made products — marketed under more than 30 labels.

But this week, after nearly three weeks of the voluntary recall action, the FDA decided that it had to do the job itself. Its first step was to send a federal marshal to the Bronx, N.Y., warehouse of Derkin Brothers Inc. to seize 45,000 cans of Bon Vivant soups and other canned products.

Other such seizures are expected. "Our goal is to account for every single can," a FDA spokesman said. But he admitted that it is impossible to track every last can to a corner grocery shelf or to someone's home cupboard.

The FDA Friday also seized nearly 7,000 dozen eggs and 45,000 pounds of catfish food — the latter intended to feed fish in ponds in the south and southwest, where catfish growing is an up and coming industry.

The eggs and the fish feed were tainted with polychlorinated biphenyls, a DDT-like substance that leaked from the cooling system of a fish meal plant in Wilmington, N.C. Feed from the same plant was traced to a large chicken producer, Holly Farms, recently and led to an order to destroy 77,000 broilers that had been fed on it.

Each time FDA staff members are pulled off their routine assignments to handle crises like the Bon Vivant one, they fall farther and farther behind on their regular inspections, says the agency, increasing the likelihood that there will be a fresh horror story from some other source.

Only about 11,000 of the more than 60,000 installations subject to FDA food inspections are checked each year, at best. This year, because of the mercury in fish, the contain-

See FDA, Page 2

FDA's Checks Curtailed

Continued

ated fish meal, the poisoned soup and other special problems, probably fewer than 9,000 inspections will be made.

Edwards told a House Subcommittee on Public Health and the Environment that, although federal inspectors could never make absolutely sure that no dangerous food is marketed, he could do a pretty good job if he had 1,500 men in the field instead of 250. That would cost, he estimated, about \$75 to \$80 million a year compared to his present budget of \$18 million for food inspection.

Subcommittee Chairman Paul Rogers, D-Fla., asked Edwards whether the Office of Management and Budget had put a ceiling on his budget request. Edwards loyally declined to say that he had asked for more money and been slapped down, but he admitted that the budget request for 1972 — which will permit an increase of at most 60 inspectors — was worked out in conferences with OMB.

Rogers said it is clear that the FDA is "woefully undermanned and underfinanced" for the job of protecting the American consumer, and said Congress will have to take the lead in giving it what it needs.

Meanwhile in a metropolitan New York hospital, Mrs. Samuel Cochran of Bedford Village, N.Y., lies paralyzed and in critical condition from the poison she consumed out of a can of Bon Vivant Vichyssoise on June 29. Her husband, who apparently ate more of the soup, died the next day.

The Bon Vivant Newark plant, the Rogers subcommittee was told, had not been inspected since May, 1967. One reason was that, since FDA inspectors cannot inspect every plant much often than every six months, they try to judge which ones are most likely to need close attention.

The Bon Vivant plant, on the basis of 17 inspections, was classified as a relatively high quality operation that could safely be passed over if necessary.