

Food Safety and Security - Saving Lives by Anonymous Whistleblowing

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Food should be available to everyone and also be safe. Regrettably in many places there is not enough food and the food that is available often is not safe. The FAO estimated that every year about 600 million people fall ill after eating contaminated food, which is more than 8% of all people. Of these, 420 000 people die (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/food-safety>; accessed 27-5-2022).

Food may be unsafe for a number of reasons, contamination may be unintentional, such as in the case of mycotoxins or the unavailability of clean water. Sometimes, however, it is intentional, such as is the case when chemicals are added to the food to make more profit. Many readers may remember the addition of melamine to milk and milk products, to simulate protein; using lead oxide to improve the colour of paprika powder and the use of lead chromate to do the same with curcuma (turmeric) powder. A different dangerous cause is hiding that food is contaminated with pathogenic microorganisms, such as was the case with peanut butter, contaminated with salmonella, resulting in 714 consumers ill and 9 deaths in 2008 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/19/us/peanut-butter-salmonella-trial/index.html>, accessed 9 July 2022). Other examples are contamination with foreign material, such as pieces of glass, metal, plastic or splinters of bones.

What matters is that such cases are unnecessary, could have been prevented and lives could have been saved. The fact is that people who knew about these crimes, did not intervene and did not report. They agreed with the criminal activity because they benefitted from it, financially or career wise. In most cases, however, it is the scare of retaliation, losing one's job or worse. If you are not aware of these reasons, visit <https://whistleblowersblog.org/whistleblower-of-the-week/dr-yasmine-motarjemi/> (accessed 9 July 2022), as a start.

Although it is claimed by many governments and companies that whistleblowing is welcome because it will help to improve product safety and therefore whistleblowers will be protected, reality is that in general companies are protected against whistleblowing and whistleblowers are exposed, not protected. If whistleblowing could be done anonymously, the situation would be different. This, however, would require that anonymity would be taken seriously, which means that it should be impossible to identify the whistleblower.

The Global Harmonization Initiative (GHI) has as goal "Achieving consensus on the science of food regulations and legislations to ensure the global availability of safe and wholesome food products for all consumers". With that in mind, a few years ago a working group was formed to address the problem of anonymity in whistleblowing for food safety. The result is that now really anonymous whistleblowing is possible indeed, using a dedicated website to alert GHI but in such a way that GHI cannot find out who the whistleblower is and nobody else can.

The press release of 9 August 2021 summarised the reason for launching the anonymous whistleblower food safety incident report site as follows: "Across the world, most food industry employees dare not report information about safety concerns externally because of the consequences of their employer finding out who they are. Some employees follow their conscience and the consequence is, that while saving people from harm, they often lose their job and may possibly suffer worse consequences. That is still the fate of many whistleblowers. For that reason, the GHI has developed an anonymous food safety incident reporting site. The emphasis is on anonymous and we have taken web-based pri-

vacy safeguards to ensure this. While filling in the online report, the reporter is also frequently reminded not to reveal anything that would make it possible to identify themselves”.

How then does GHI establish that a whistleblower report is sincere and not an action to defame a company or take revenge for any reason?

The whistleblower, being anonymous, can not be interrogated later to find out. In summary, GHI developed a list of questions about the incident being reported and the answers, i.e., the completed incident report form, is judged by selected experts of GHI's global scientific network, all over the world and only if these experts consider the report to be "probably sincere", will GHI take action. These experts are scientists in food-related disciplines, able to judge whether data provided can be true or not. If 30% or more of the expert replies are positive, in the sense that they consider the reported incident may be true and may do serious harm to consumers, GHI will take action. GHI will then alert the local food safety authority with a message that a potentially serious food safety hazard may exist at a food plant within their jurisdiction and suggest the authority to investigate. If more than 60% of the experts reply that the report cannot be taken seriously, the report will be filed as probably faked. The report then will remain available in case additional evidence will come to the attention of GHI later.

To ensure that the GHI alert will come to the attention of the person(s) responsible for food safety without delay, GHI is maintaining a global database of names, email addresses, physical addresses and telephone numbers.

Although anyone may have found out about a serious food safety incident, employees self-evidently are the ones who most likely will discover this first. The slogan "Would you let your family eat the food you make at work?" is used to motivate employees to blow the whistle, if necessary.

Language is not a barrier

It is unlikely that everyone will be able to report in the English language and therefore the whistleblower webpage is available in many languages. Thus, the language cannot be an excuse not to report a serious incident. When clicking on the whistleblower link, <https://whistle.globalharmonization.net/>, immediately a language selection page is shown, with links to the reporting forms in currently about 40 languages. Those pages also have links to frequently asking questions pages, answering questions with respect to anonymity, as well as the original press release, explaining the need for the whistleblowing site.

Employers - Food Companies

We encourage employers to promote the information about the anonymous whistleblowing opportunity because it certainly is in their interest that food safety incidents are prevented. For that purpose, companies may reproduce the picture below and post it at relevant sites in the company. These picture too are available in many languages and can be made available in any local language if needed (Figure 1).

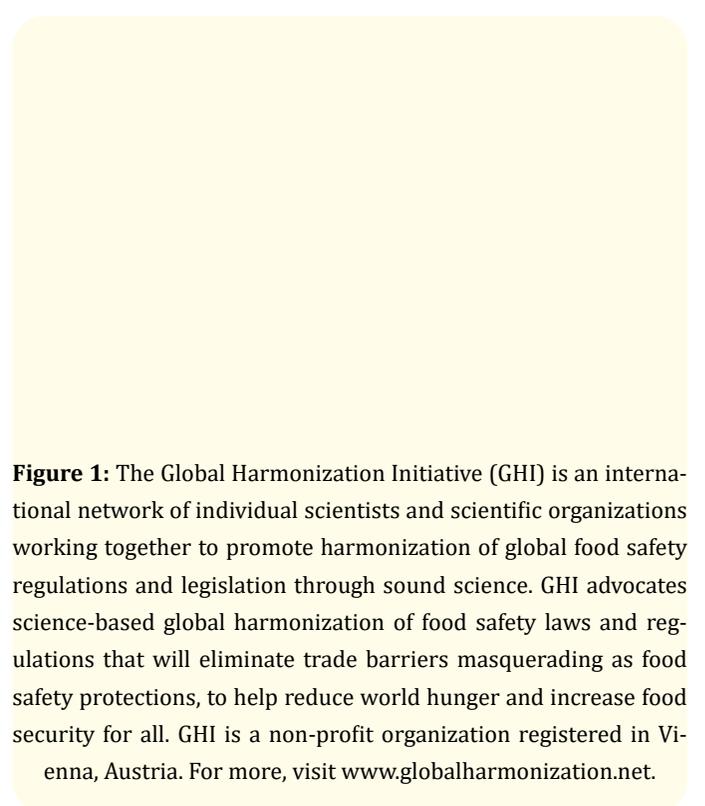


Figure 1: The Global Harmonization Initiative (GHI) is an international network of individual scientists and scientific organizations working together to promote harmonization of global food safety regulations and legislation through sound science. GHI advocates science-based global harmonization of food safety laws and regulations that will eliminate trade barriers masquerading as food safety protections, to help reduce world hunger and increase food security for all. GHI is a non-profit organization registered in Vienna, Austria. For more, visit www.globalharmonization.net.