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Image source: Wayne Barran, courtesy of Cawthron Laboratories

Legacy of melamine contamination awaited

By Iain MacIntyre

Melamine-tainted milk product consumption in China has reportedly been linked to four infant deaths, the hospitalisation of at least 13,000 children and illness of about 54,000 in total at the time of writing.

As the affected Chinese people and industries look to make their recoveries, it also remains to be seen what impact the crisis will have on the global future of incidentally-involved Fonterra and therefore, wider New Zealand interests.

While Chinese Government officials recently attempted to inform a meeting of the World Trade Organisation the contamination had been accidental,

more widely accepted is the World Health Organisation's assessment the chemical was added deliberately.

A white powder similar in appearance to flour or milk powder, melamine is mainly created as a byproduct of the farm fertiliser urea – of which, coincidentally, China is one of the two biggest global producers. The chemical is used in a variety of industrial products such as plastics, paints and adhesives.

However, as per protein, melamine contains a large quantity of the element nitrogen. With no pre-crisis Chinese standards existing for the amount allowable in foods, watered-down milk laced

with the chemical was therefore able to pass quality tests.

While undoubtedly boosting the profits of those perpetrating the fraud, the introduction of melamine also put consumers at risk of developing kidney stones and even life-threatening kidney failure. Children have been particularly afflicted by the poisoning due to contaminated milk being apparently unwittingly used in the production of infant milk formula, which is where the connection to Fonterra is drawn.

In line with the goal recently stated by Fonterra chairperson, Henry van der Heyden of one day drawing half of its

milk supply from countries outside New Zealand, the co-op had progressively acquired a 43 per cent stake in one of China's largest dairy companies, Sanlu.

Aided by Fonterra's technological nous, the Chinese company opened a plant in 2006 from which it produced high-value nutritional products, such as infant formula made under Fonterra's Annum brand. However, as Sanlu was reliant on third-party collection depots, it did not have absolute control over its milk supply.

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