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## OHIO expert joins Pell Lecture Series Upcoming address to tackle issue of food safety

Apr 13, 2009

By Monica Chapman

When it comes to environmental health, issues abound. Asbestos. Carbon monoxide. Climate change. Natural disasters. But many wouldn't include food in the long list of environmental fear factors. That is a big mistake, according to Michele Morrone, director of Environmental Studies and associate professor of environmental health at Ohio University.

In her most recent book, "Poisons on our Plates: The real food safety problem in the United States," Morrone advocates major policy changes to rein in the growing dangers of food-borne illness in the United States. Morrone will be discussing food safety at length on April 15 as a visiting scholar in the Pell Center Lecture Series at Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I.

"It's an honor," Morrone said. "And it means a lot to me because the mission of the Pell Center is actually very similar to the mission of the Voinovich School in that both are based on applied research."

In her dual roles at Ohio University, Morrone currently splits her time between the College of Health and Human Services and the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs. A registered sanitarian and credentialed food safety professional, Morrone also formerly served as chief of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Education.

Morrone recently sat down with *Outlook* to discuss her book, her upcoming speaking engagement and the state of food safety in the United States.

### Q: "Poisons on our Plates" has a bit of a scare tactic to it. How common is food poisoning?

A: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 76 million people suffer from food-borne illnesses every year in the U.S. Officials estimate 5,000 deaths per year, but that could be a gross underestimate because the only way that we can estimate is by looking at how many people actually go to their primary care physicians or contact the health department. And when was the last time you contacted the health department when you had diarrhea?

### Q: From spinach to peanut butter, how have these recent recalls affected public health?

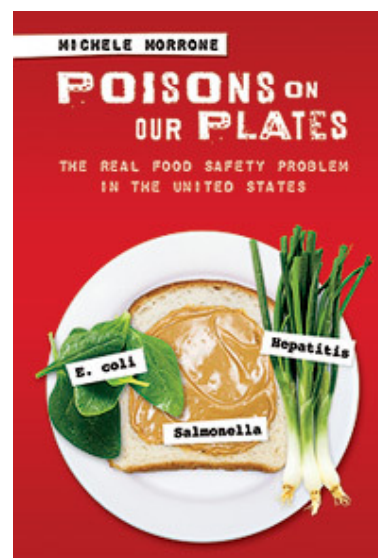
A: Honestly, these recent outbreaks -- especially the peanut butter outbreak -- are the best thing that could ever happen in terms of food safety because it has created this outrage component, and we really need the public to be outraged for the politicians to act. Now we're hearing that food safety and FDA is going to be one of the growing job lines in the next couple of years. So it's a great thing for food safety specifically and public health in general.

### Q: Who's to blame for the recent influx of outbreaks?

A: There are several things that are going on here that have led us to this point in history where we're seeing these global outbreaks. One of the main



Michele Morrone



"Poisons on Our Plates"

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reasons in this country is a historical neglect of the public health system in the U.S. We're also importing more, plus we're transporting a lot of foods across the country to keep up with consumer demand.

**Q: But don't government regulations help to keep risks to a minimum?**

A: Surprisingly, there is no federal policy or agency that controls bacteria and viruses in our food. In some ways, public health professionals are victims of their own success. Because people aren't getting sick, policy makers think we don't need to put money there. But once you start messing with prevention money, you start to see what's going on now.

**Q: Can the situation be managed locally?**

A: Local health departments are really strapped when it comes down to being able to do all the inspections they need to do. There are some counties in Ohio where there is one person responsible for inspecting all the restaurants, all the food outlets. So that's a problem.

**Q: How can consumers protect themselves?**

A: You should assume that every food that you are going to eat has the potential to be contaminated, because it does. And if you take that assumption, then you will treat your food differently. There are simple things you can do like cooking meats to proper temperatures, making sure you have a working thermometer, washing produce – not dramatic life-altering behavioral changes. But if you get this mindset that there's a pathogen there, you're going to really minimize your risk.

**Q: How do products at local markets, such as the Farmers Market, compare to the products available through larger grocery chains?**

A: With the Farmers Market, somebody picked it and is handing it to you essentially. So you can understand what has happened to your food between the farm and your table. When you're buying from a grocery store, there is less confidence in that.

**Q: Is there a higher risk associated with any one type of food: canned, processed, fresh, etc.?**

A: There was a time when I would've said yes. But not anymore. And peanut butter is such a great example. You think if it's in a jar and it's sealed, there's no risk here. But that's just not true. Generally speaking though, there are foods that are more hazardous than others. Those would be high-protein foods and things like meat and dairy. But there are so many exceptions.

**Q: Who are the "biggest losers" when an outbreak does occur?**

A: The food industry suffers. Consumers suffer in terms of health and productivity. And then there's the whole health-care system -- how much money we spend treating people, doctors' visits, lost work and those types of things. It's a wide-reaching societal issue, and the thing that is so perplexing is that it's so preventable if we just had the political will.

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**Related Links**

Pell Lecture Series (following this link will take you outside Ohio University's Web site): <http://www.salve.edu/pellcenter/lectureseries.cfm>  
 Greenwood Publishing Group's description of 'Poisons on our Plates' (following this link will take you outside Ohio University's Web site):  
<http://www.greenwood.com/books/printFlyer.aspx?sku=C34975>  
 'I'll pass on the E. coli' (*Outlook* article):  
<http://www.ohio.edu/outlook/07-08/July/639.cfm>

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