

CDC HAD HUNCH ON LISTERIA SOURCE

January 31 1999

UPI

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. -- Dr. Paul Mead, an epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control was cited as saying he gathered enough evidence by mid-December to make a "pretty strong hunch" that Bil Mar Foods of Zeeland, Mich., was the source of a Listeria outbreak, but his agency didn't recommend the recall until eight days later, on Dec. 22.

At that point, the death toll was at three, including one miscarriage and more than 30 illnesses in nine states. To date, the deaths of 12 people and three miscarriages, and more than 70 illnesses nationwide are blamed on Listeria-tainted meat

More than 15 million pounds of meat have been recalled since Sara Lee's December announcement. Mead was cited as telling the Grand Rapids Press the CDC recall recommendation came several days after an epidemiologist from the Minnesota Health Department urged a recall, adding, "Recalls are always either too early or too late. If you're right, it's always too late. If you're wrong, it's always too early."

He was further cited as saying it's unclear whether an earlier recall could have saved lives or prevented more illnesses. He also noted that CDC investigators are trying to determine if dust at the Bil-Mar plant may have led to the Listeria outbreak because officials think there was a "construction event" in the building that sprayed dust onto the equipment. The dust is suspected to have contained Listeria, which is commonly found in soil and water.