

poisoning in eight western states. The affected people suffered from diarrhoea and vomiting after drinking low-fat and calcium-enriched milk products from a Snow Brand factory in Osaka — approximately 180 cases required hospital treatment.

Adding to consumer concerns were suspicions of a cover-up. After the first few cases of food poisoning were reported, Snow Brand detected traces of *Staphylococcus aureus* in swab examinations of its facilities on 29 June. However, these findings were not made public immediately and products were not recalled until 1 July. It later emerged that hygiene standards at the plant were lax. The bacteria collected in a valve that had not been cleaned for almost a month, although regulations stipulated that it should have been cleaned every week. Newspapers also reported that workers regularly used milk that had passed its sell-by date as an ingredient for high-calcium milk and other products. Tetsuro Ishikawa, the company president, and three other executives have accepted responsibility and resigned. “We were over-confident,” Mr Ishikawa said.

Snow Brand, which held 14% of the milk market in Japan and more than 40% of the cheese market, has seen its share price plunge as a result of the incident and 21 plants have been closed for inspection. Consumers have taken no risks following an incident several years ago in which some people died after an outbreak of infections with *Escherichia coli* O157:H7. Snow Brand products are suffering from a sharp downturn in sales.

In the two weeks after the Snow Brand incident, at least six other firms were forced to recall products after consumer complaints. The Yamazaki Baking company had to withdraw 70 000 packets of desserts after admitting that improper packaging may have led to a sour taste reported by customers. Morinaga Milk withdrew 2200 packets of cheese that were found to contain chemicals and Hagakure recalled 150 000 packets of noodles after some were found to be mouldy.

Yuji Tsushima, Minister of Health and Welfare, has organized an inspection of Snow Brand’s 21 production plants. “We are starting to see a bit of a panic,” he acknowledged. The panic may yet prove to be fruitful. Careful checks by the authorities have revealed that 10% of the 774 dairy plants in Japan have hygiene and other problems.

Improved safety regulations may not be the end of the matter. The Osaka City government has threatened to file criminal charges against Snow Brand. ■

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More than 13 000 reported ill in Japan after drinking milk products

Japanese health authorities have launched an investigation into one of the country’s worst outbreaks of food poisoning amid growing consumer concerns about the safety of dairy and other manufactured produce. On 10 July, the Ministry of Health and Welfare reported a total of 13 809 cases of food