



## Restaurant food workers need regulation, former health chief says

**Doug Williamson**

Windsor Star

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Ontario needs to regulate restaurant food servers or risk public exposure to food-borne illnesses, the province's former chief medical officer of health Dr. Sheela Basrur said Monday in Windsor.

Basrur, who has stepped down because she is battling cancer, made an appearance at a convention of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies at the Art Gallery of Windsor.

"I think (the issue) is on the back burner, and the burner's off," she said. "The public would expect and deserve the staff be trained in food safety."

One year ago, while she was still on duty, the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit caused a furor when inspectors poured bleach into egg salad prepared by the Friends of Willistead for the annual Art in the Park weekend.

The incident prompted criticism of overzealous inspectors, showed the lack of cohesive regulations for food preparers and resulted in loosening of rules for church events, farm fairs and similar events by Health Minister George Smitherman.

But Monday, Basrur said the incident illustrates Ontario's inconsistent approach to protect the public in food preparation, because only the city of Toronto has a bylaw requiring restaurant food handlers to be certified.

She said people getting on a bus expect the driver to be properly trained, and people dining in restaurants deserve the same, chiding the government for lack of action on the issue.

"There's many ways of getting there," she said, citing the example of Toronto and the province of Alberta which have comprehensive regulations for food preparation to ensure public safety.

"There needs to be the political will to do it."

Basrur, who was on the job for four years before stepping aside late last year, also urged the government to forge ahead with its promise to overhaul the public laboratory health system. There are 12 such labs, and until recently they issued

reports - on tests for sexually transmitted diseases and other conditions, for example - on paper. The province has also said it will relocate its main lab to downtown Toronto, but so far no bricks and mortar have gone up, she said.

Basrur said there are "potentially deadly consequences" to not going ahead with the lab relocation: She was on the job during the SARS incident of 2003 when 44 people in Toronto died, and said the importance of an effective, fast-acting public lab system cannot be overstated.

Received with obvious affection by the 150 public health representatives in attendance, Basrur said her battle with a rare type of cancer - affecting her blood vessels and soft tissue - has taught her that while the system is taking care of her, she has learned she has to look out for herself.

"I have learned that patients need to take an active role in their own health care," she said. "It's hard for people. I see it all the time in the hospital."

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