

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Enterohemorrhagic *Escherichia coli* O157 in Libya

We have read with interest the Letter to the Editor by Ahmed and Abouzeed reporting on the important issue of enterohemorrhagic *Escherichia coli* O157 (EHEC O157) in dairy cattle in Libya (1). Based on two cited references, the authors state that: “Surveys of diarrheal stools from children in African nations, including Libya, have detected EHEC O157 in 8–15% of the samples”. One of the cited studies is not related to Africa, and the other, on the characterization of diarrheagenic *E. coli* from diarrheic Libyan children, clearly stated that EHEC was not detected in the stool specimens examined.

However, a study from Tunisia examined 212 stool samples from diarrheic and non-diarrheic children and adults for EHEC using PCR-based techniques (2). They observed 11 isolates (10 non-typeable, one O157:H7) carrying the *stx* gene coding for EHEC. Another study, also from Tunisia, found EHEC in 10.4% of diarrheagenic and 11.1% of asymptomatic children (3).

In the 1990s we examined stool specimens from 157 children with diarrhea and 157 controls for O157:H7 (4). Sorbitol non-fermenting *E. coli* isolates were subjected to agglutination with *E. coli* O157:H7 antiserum. In the specimens examined, *E. coli* O157:H7 was found in 7.0% and 4.4% of diarrheic and control children, respectively. Although cattle and their products are the main source of *E. coli* O157, asymptomatic carriers may play a role in the spread of this organism in the community. In addition, serotyping assays with specific antiserum may not be reliable for identification of *E. coli* O157:H7 strains (5). Rapid and reliable PCR-based methods designed to detect toxin-encoding genes for identification of EHEC O157:H7 and non-*E. coli* O157 are available. These methods should be used to provide reliable data on the role of EHEC O157 and non-O157 in causation of foodborne outbreaks and associated hemolytic uremic

syndrome in the community and to determine the sources of such outbreaks.

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