Code of practice for food handler activities

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Background
The food industry regulates various aspects of food handler activities, according to legislation and customer expectations. The purpose of this paper is to provide a code of practice which delineates a set of working standards for food handler hygiene, handwashing, use of protective equipment, wearing of jewellery and body piercing.

Methods
The code was developed by a working group of occupational physicians with expertise in both food manufacturing and retail, using a risk assessment approach. Views were also obtained from other occupational physicians working within the food industry and the relevant regulatory bodies. The final version of the code (available in full as Supplementary data in Occupational Medicine Online) therefore represents a broad consensus of opinion.

Conclusion
The code of practice represents a set of minimum standards for food handler suitability and activities, based on a practical assessment of risk, for application in food businesses. It aims to provide useful working advice to food businesses of all sizes.

Key words
Body piercing; food handler; hand washing; jewellery; personal protective equipment.

Introduction
Occupational health practice in the food sector is somewhat different from other industries because it encompasses an additional element whereby the fitness and activities of its employees can adversely affect the safety of its products. In this context, a number of publications by authoritative bodies have dealt with the fitness standards for food handlers [1–3], including a recent paper produced by consensus among occupational physicians working in the food industry [4]. However, it is not simply the fitness of food handlers which can compromise the product. There are a number of other issues surrounding both the suitability and activities of food handlers which require control, in order to limit risks to product integrity, for example: food handler hygiene, hand washing, use of protective equipment, wearing of jewellery and body piercing.

The United Kingdom food industry is subject to statutory regulation according to the Food Safety Act [5] and associated regulations [6]. In addition to the statutory requirements, the industry has to meet extra demands from food retailers, since they carry final responsibility for presenting a safe and wholesome product to their customers, i.e. the general public. It is now common practice for food retailers or their agents to audit food premises. The standards against which auditing takes place have, in the main, been developed without a good evidence base and are not always clearly related to the risk to product safety. Occupational physicians working in the industry are frequently asked to provide an opinion on these other issues surrounding safe preparation of food, even though they have not been involved in setting the standards.

The code of practice presented in this paper relates to food handler suitability and activities, and has been developed by occupational physicians who are members of the Food Industry Medical Association, a subgroup of the Society of Occupational Medicine. The main objective has been to produce a set of minimum standards, based on a sensible assessment of risk, for practical application in all food businesses.

Method
The code of practice was initially drafted by a working group consisting of the authors, whose expertise covers both food manufacturing and retailing. In determining the standards the working group recognized that there is no evidence base for many of the elements covered. In these circumstances, the assessment of risk was made on the basis of a working knowledge and understanding of the industry. It is important to understand that the aim was to define measures which would result in acceptable, rather than zero risk.
Following drafting of the code, views were sought from the wider membership of the Food Industry Medical Association. In addition, opinions were sought from the Food Standards Agency and the Health & Safety Executive, although it is important to understand that these organizations were not asked or expected to endorse the code. The end result, in the form of the code of practice (published in full as Supplementary data in *Occupational Medicine* Online), therefore represents a broad consensus of views.

**Concluding remarks**

The code of practice represents a set of minimum standards for food handler suitability and activities, based on a sensible assessment of risk, for practical application in food businesses. It is not meant to be an absolutely rigid set of rules and, during its drafting, it was accepted that some businesses may wish to deviate from the recommendations, on the basis that there are reasonable alternatives. Rather, it aims to provide useful working advice to food businesses of all sizes.

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**References**