Chapter 23 Toxic School Lunch: Chemical Poisoning of Elementary School Children in Joliet, Illinois

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This chapter follows the perspectives of Alpesh Patel and Mark Dworkin as they investigate a troubling outbreak at an Elementary School in Joliet, Illinois. Not only is this chapter about this outbreak, but also gives an example of what happens when people from different departments work together to solve something quickly. Since the events of 9/11 and the anthrax scare was still in people's minds, bio terrorism was something of concern which meant that things needed to be done fast.

The outbreak took place on November 25, 2002 which effected 157 people (151 students and 6 teachers). When investigated further it was found that the lunch smelled like “ammonia.” Unfortunately for the investigators, there were not many previous outbreaks like this to work off from. This gave the concern that the outbreak was most likely caused from heavy metal contamination instead of food poisoning because of the fast acting sickness. It was found that what occurred was extremely incompetent people making decisions that caused this mass illness. Contamination came from the warehouse the school gets its food from. This chapter shows that it is very important to act fast when you are working with something no one is sure about. Even though it was not an act of bio terrorism, it was something that could have gotten a lot more children sick.

Questions:
1) What do you think made this investigation run as smoothly as it did?
2) What was the case definition? Why did Dworkin think this limited their investigation?
3) Why was it important to interview the students as quickly as possible?
4) Why did the kitchen staff not report any strange smells to the investigation or stop serving the food to the children?
5) Why do you think that the operations manager at the trucking and distribution company re boxed and send out the contaminated food?
6) What were the lessons learned in this chapter? Why are they important?
7) How do you think you would have reacted if you were a parent to one of the children who had gotten sick?