

A raw deal?

London woman says people should be allowed to buy raw milk

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Pam Killeen enjoys a raw milk smoothie outside her home in London Thursday, October 20, 2011. The activist is trying to rally support for her friend, farmer Michael Schmidt, who is on a hunger strike to protest the fact that it's illegal to sell unpasteurized milk in Canada. JOSHUA FREEMAN/ LONDONER/QMI AGENCY

Pam Killeen is worried about her friend, Michael Schmidt. The Durham farmer has been on an ongoing hunger strike to try and get the Ontario government to change its thinking when it comes to the issue of raw milk.

"He sounds weak, but also very determined," says Killeen — a Londoner who hosts a weekly radio spot on nutrition. "He says he's willing to die for this cause. We're all very worried."

Schmidt says he won't eat until he gets a meeting with Premier Dalton McGuinty to discuss the dairy laws in the province.

So along with others Killeen has been engaged in a letter-writing campaign to try and get elected officials onside with their cause.

The issue, she says, is that it's currently illegal to sell non-pasteurized milk in Ontario. Although it is legal to drink raw milk from a cow you own, it's a crime to bottle it and sell it. Killeen says while there used to be good cause for such laws when filthy inner city dairies churned out unsanitary milk in the early 20th century, times have changed and the quality of raw milk can be assessed based on the health of the cows it comes from.

"It was deemed a hazardous product decades ago and they (government) just won't let go of it," she says.

Killeen says there are at least 300 people in London who regularly consume raw milk and that interest is growing.

"I'm part of a raw milk community in London," she says. "Most people in this city don't know a lot about food in general. I had to get very sick before I started to research the lack of quality in our food system today."

Killeen says she suffered from chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and multiple chemical sensitivities for more than a decade before she started changing her diet to rest on natural, nutrient-dense foods.

Moreover, she says Canada is one of the only advanced countries in the world where it's actually illegal to sell raw milk.

"People want their freedom back," she says. "They want to be able to walk into a store and buy raw milk if they want to."

But health officials take a different perspective on the issue.

"It's actually illegal to sell unpasteurized milk," says Dave Pavletic, acting manager of the food safety program at the Middlesex-London Health Unit. "Unpasteurized milk has been implicated in several food-borne illnesses. If milk is unpasteurized there are several bacteria that can grow within the milk. Those include pathogens – harmful bacteria that can result in food poisoning."

Pavletic can't say how many cases of food poisoning occur in London each year or what the nutritional benefits might be versus raw milk, but he says the health unit enforces the provincial regulations in order to keep people safe.

He added he isn't aware of any charges that have been laid against people in London recently for selling raw milk.

"When you pasteurize a product you're ensuring that the pathogens are killed. So if you're consuming an unpasteurized product there is the potential that harmful bacteria are present in the milk."