

**For discussion
on 17 July 2001**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Clenbuterol Food Poisoning Incidents

Purpose

This paper gives Members an account of the recent clenbuterol food poisoning cases in June, the existing surveillance and control measures by the Government to protect public health, and public announcements of clenbuterol food poisoning cases.

Recent clenbuterol food poisoning cases

2. On 21 June 2001, the Department of Health (DH) received a food poisoning report of two persons suspected of being affected by consumption of clenbuterol-tainted pig kidney. DH, and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) started a joint investigation on this report immediately and identified the retail outlets concerned shortly. Food samples of pig offal and pork were taken for testing analysis of clenbuterol. In the meantime, FEHD initiated source tracing of the contaminated pig offal and pork. The remaining pig offal and pork of the same batch were surrendered by the retail outlets concerned for disposal. FEHD has also stepped up health education on the shop runners to get pig offal or pork from legal source.

3. Between 23 June and 28 June 2001, DH received four more reports of suspected clenbuterol food poisoning affecting ten persons. All of them had shortly recovered. Unfortunately, no food remnant was available for laboratory analysis to confirm the presence of clenbuterol in the pig products (liver, kidney) consumed by these patients. Nevertheless, in view of the occurrence of five reports within one week and upon confirmation of the presence of clenbuterol in urine samples of the patients from three cases, DH issued a press release about the cluster of clenbuterol food poisoning cases on June 30. Meanwhile, the two

departments concerned continued investigations and stepped up control measures. No new cases were reported after 28 June 2001.

4. Victims in the reported cases bought the pig products from markets in Tai Po, Tin Shiu Wai, Tuen Mun, and Kowloon Bay. The dates of purchase were between June 20 and June 26, 2001.

5. As of 12 July this year, there were nine reports of clenbuterol food poisoning affecting a total of 21 persons. In 2000, there were 37 reports involving 85 persons.

Existing Control and Surveillance Measures

Control Measures in Slaughterhouses

6. Since August 1998, the Government has put in place a voluntary pig tattooing, testing and tracing system to stop clenbuterol contaminated pork and offal from reaching the retail outlets. Under the system, batches of imported and local pigs are all required to bear distinctively assigned tattoo numbers before being sent for slaughtering. Pigs imported from the Mainland must come from registered farms and be accompanied by Animal Health Certificates () issued by the Entry Exit Inspection and Quarantine , certifying that the pigs concerned have not been fed with beta-agonists (including clenbuterol). Before pigs are slaughtered, staff of Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) would collect urine samples of pigs for laboratory testing on residues of beta-agonists. If such residues are found in the samples, it indicates that the entire batch of pigs with the same tattoo number may have been fed with the drugs. Between January and June 2001, FEHD took some 41,200 urine samples from pigs before slaughtering, with 128 of them showing unsatisfactory results. The unsatisfactory rates of urine samples from local and imported pigs are 0.47% and 0.007% respectively, in comparison with 0.73% and 0.06 % in 2000.

Food Surveillance at Retail Level

7. At the retail level, FEHD carries out targeted food surveillance programme on clenbuterol in pork and pig offal. Retailers found to be

selling contaminated food are prosecuted under Sections 52 and 54 of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. The offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and six-month imprisonment. Between January and June 2001, some 2500 food samples, mainly pork and pig offal, were taken for test of clenbuterol residues. 15 samples showed unsatisfactory results, representing an unsatisfactory rate of 0.6%. Based on the results of the food surveillance programme, we have launched 50 prosecutions against sellers of clenbuterol contaminated pig products since 1999, among these 42 cases were convicted, 2 cases were acquitted and the remaining are still pending legal procedure.

Combat against Meat from Illegal Source

Smuggling

8. We believe that pork contaminated by clenbuterol came from illegally slaughtered pigs and smuggled meat. To combat illegal import of meat, the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the Police and FEHD have made joint efforts to combat the problem. For the first six months of this year, there have been 63 operations seizing close to 24 tonnes of smuggled meat and 17 persons were arrested.

Illegal Slaughtering

9. FEHD also takes vigorous enforcement action against illegal slaughtering activities. Between January and June 2001, the Department smashed 11 illegal slaughterhouses in 76 operations and surveillance visits during which 61 live pigs, 10 tonnes of pork and offal were seized. Ten persons were arrested and charged.

Retail Level

10. At the retail level, FEHD carries out frequent surprise inspections on fresh provision shops and market stalls to curb sale of pork from unapproved sources. Since 1 January 2001, some 12,400 such surprise inspections have been carried out against dubious meat retail outlets. Three persons were arrested for possession of meat from illegal source.

Public Announcement of Clenbuterol Food Poisoning Incidents

11. Starting this month, DH will upload statistics on confirmed cases of food poisoning due to clenbuterol on its homepage (<http://www.info.gov.hk/dh>). This new measure is designed to improve public access to information about chemical food poisoning.

Way Forward

12. On 27 June 2001, the Administration tabled at the Legislative Council for vetting procedure the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Chemical Residues) Regulation and the Harmful Substances in Food (Amendment) Regulation 2001. We expect that the problem of food poisoning by clenbuterol will be more effectively controlled and prevented at source after these two regulations have come into force.

**Department of Health/
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department**

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