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**Legislative Council
Panel on Health Services**

Clenbuterol Food Poisoning : control measures and recent cases

PURPOSE

This paper briefs members on the present control system regarding the feeding of clenbuterol to pigs, the present situation regarding the recent clenbuterol food poisoning cases and the actions taken by the Government.

PRESENT CONTROL SYSTEM

2. Clenbuterol is an anti-asthmatic drug. It has been improperly used to feed pigs for the purpose of increasing the lean meat output in pork. At present there is no legal control on the feeding of clenbuterol to pigs.

3. The first case of clenbuterol food poisoning appeared in August 1998. To ensure food safety and safeguard public health, the Government took the following measures –

- The then Agriculture and Fisheries Department (AFD) put in place a pig tattooing and tracing system. Under the system, different batches of imported pigs and pigs from local farms have to bear

distinctively assigned tattoo numbers before they are slaughtered so their origins can be traced. In addition, pigs imported from the Mainland must come from registered farms and be accompanied by Animal Health Certificates (動物衛生證書) issued by the State Administration for Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國出入境檢驗檢疫局) certifying that they have not been fed with clenbuterol.

- The then AFD began to collect urine samples for laboratory tests of clenbuterol residues. 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 clenbuterol. (The work has been taken over by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) since the beginning of 2000.)
- The then Department of Health carried out targeted food surveillance programme on clenbuterol in pork and pig offals. Retailers selling contaminated pork and offal are prosecuted under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. The offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$10,000 and three-month imprisonment. (The work has been taken over by FEHD since the beginning of 2000.)
- Apart from regularly inspecting local pig farms and advising farmers on the proper use of animal feeds, the then AFD also established a working group with farmers on clenbuterol testing and the tattoo system.

4. Since August 1998, the implementation of these measures have had obvious effects. In the food surveillance programme, the percentage of food

samples found to contain clenbuterol decreased drastically from 12.5% (before August 1998) to 1.1% in 1999. The testing of pig urine samples collected at slaughterhouses also shows that the number of problematic pigs is small. Amongst 56 000 samples tested in 1999, only (550, representing 0.98%) were unsatisfactory. The unsatisfactory rates for local and imported pig urine samples were 1.09% and 0.21% respectively. From January 2000 to early this month, some 44 000 urine samples were taken and amongst them 314 (0.17%) show unsatisfactory results (11 of the unsatisfactory samples were found in October). The unsatisfactory rates for local and imported pig urine samples are 0.87% and 0.049% respectively.

5. From 1999 to the present day 24 prosecutions have been made against the sale of pork or pig offal containing clenbuterol, out of which 19 have been concluded and successful.

6. The working group with farmers on clenbuterol testing and the tattoo system established by the then AFD has met 15 times up to now.

7. Apart from monitoring and control specifically targeted at the abuse of clenbuterol, the then Regional Services Department (before the year 2000) and FEHD (since the beginning of 2000) and other relevant departments also launch operations against illegal slaughtering activities and the illegal import of meat. Enforcement actions against illegal slaughtering carried out in 1999 and the first nine months of 2000 are summarized below-

	1999	2000 (Jan - Sept)
Number of raids	67	59
Number of persons arrested	13	4

Quantity of pork and pig offal seized	18 500 kg	19 100 kg
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The trend is that large-scale illegal slaughtering activities have largely ceased and small-scale illegal slaughterhouses operating in more hidden locations have taken their place. Operators of these illegal slaughterhouses tend to leave the site as soon as they sense signs of a raid coming on, leaving behind live pigs, pork and offal at the site. This leads to increase in the quantity of pork and offal seized but reduction in the number of persons arrested.

8. To combat illegal import of meat, the Customs and Excise Department and FEHD launch joint operations to inspect and seize suspected live pigs and meat. Apart from daily enforcement actions, Customs and Excise Department launched 59 operations, 42 of which were jointly with FEHD, to combat the illegal import of live pigs and meat at land boundary control points in the first nine months of the year 2000. Some 33 900 kg of pork was seized. At sea, Customs officers searched 13 167 vessels in their daily actions with a total seizure of 213 730 kg of pork. No live pigs were seized in this period. Since early this year, with the assistance of the Police, FEHD has also taken enforcement action on 42 cases of illegally imported meat intercepted at the Shek Chung Au Police Checkpoint. 28 persons were arrested and 13 300 kg of pork meat were seized.

9. To curb the sale of pork from unapproved sources, FEHD always carries out surprise inspections to suspected fresh provision shops and market stalls. In the year 2000, up to 5 October, over 9 400 inspections have been made. Prosecutions have been brought against 11 operators of 8 fresh provision shops. Three licences have also been cancelled.

Recent clenbuterol food poisoning cases

10. The Department of Health received the first report of suspected clenbuterol food poisoning case on 6 October. The two departments under the Food and Environment Bureau, i.e., the FEHD and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), immediately co-ordinated measures to deal with this food incident. As at 12 October, there were 35 cases involving 82 victims. All victims have now been discharged from hospitals. There have been no new cases associated with pig products purchased after 9 October. From the result of the urine tests of the patients and other investigations, 27 cases were confirmed to be clenbuterol food poisoning. Other cases are awaiting confirmation.

11. The reported cases indicate that the problematic pig products were purchased between 5 and 9 October from markets in Shatin, Tai Po, Tseung Kwan O, Kwai Tsing, Wong Tai Sin and Yau Ma Tei. The majority of the suspected meat stalls are located in the first two districts. Since there has not been any upsurge in the unsatisfactory rate of the urine test conducted at the slaughterhouses between 1-10 October, we suspect the incriminated pig products were from illegal slaughterhouses.

Actions taken so far

12. FEHD traced the retail origin of the pork and offal containing clenbuterol and took 23 samples of pork and offal for testing. At present the samples from four fresh provision shops have been confirmed to contain clenbuterol. These four fresh provision shops will be prosecuted.

13. FEHD has also launched a territory-wide operation to inspect all meat stalls selling fresh pork and pig offals. Health inspectors examine inspection stamps on pig carcasses and invoices to ensure that fresh meat and pig offal on sale are from approved sources. At the same time, education leaflets have been distributed to stall operators to refresh their awareness of the importance to sell safe meat. As at 12 October, 875 fresh provision shops and 624 market stalls have been inspected.

14. FEHD has also stepped up its surveillance for clenbuterol at slaughterhouses and retail outlets. The number of urine samples taken have increased from 770 to 1190 per week. The number of pork and pig offal samples taken have increased from 90 to 120 per week.

15. The department has also advised the public to buy pig products from reputable retailers. FEHD has also mounted raids against illegal slaughtering activities. By 12 October, inspections have been conducted for all known suspected illegal slaughtering sites and 2 live pigs have been seized. The Customs and Excise Department has additionally searched 236 vehicles to detect illegal import of meat. AFCD has met with local farmers to appeal for their cooperation in eradicating the use of clenbuterol in local farms.

Measures to prevent occurrence of the problem

16. The following measures will continue –

- (i) increased number of inspections of meat stalls selling fresh pork and pig offal;
- (ii) increased number of urine tests at slaughterhouses;
- (iii) increased number of farm inspections;
- (iv) enhanced investigation of illegal slaughtering activities and intelligence collection; and
- (v) enhanced actions against illegal import of live pigs and pork.

17. To tackle the problem at source, we propose to introduce a new regulation under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Ordinance to, among others, control the feeding of drugs and chemicals to food animals including fish and ban the use of clenbuterol in animal feed. The proposed new regulation will empower the Government to seize food animals suspected of containing clenbuterol and other prohibited chemicals.

18. There is currently no specific legislation to regulate the feeding of drugs and chemicals to food animals. There is also no control on the quality of animal feed supplied.

19. Section 52 and section 54 of the Public Health and Municipal Services

Ordinance make it an offence to sell food which is unfit for human consumption, or not of the nature, substance or quality demanded by the purchaser. The Ordinance, however, imposes no specific safety standard on residues of drugs and chemicals (except for the prohibition of the use of four hormones as listed in the Harmful Substances in Food Regulations) in meat and other food products of animal origin, e.g. eggs and milk. The law also does not provide for the tracing back of the responsibility to the origin of the problem, i.e. the farm level.

20. The Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance prohibits the use of unregistered pharmaceuticals but there is no specific provision on their usage as feed additives. The Antibiotics Ordinance requires the sale of antibiotics to be upon a prescription of a doctor, dentist or veterinary surgeon, but this requirement does not cover antibiotics used in animal feeds.

21. In the proposed new Regulation, the initial list of prohibited chemicals covers Clenbuterol and related compounds, artificial hormones that are known to cause cancer, and antibiotics that should be reserved for fighting serious human diseases or to prevent the emergence of resistant pathogens. We will also specify the “Maximum Residue Limit” in meat and tissues in line with international practice for 37 antibiotics.

22. To facilitate more effective enforcement against sellers of meat containing prohibited chemicals or residues of other drugs and chemicals exceeding the “Maximum Residue Limits”, the Harmful Substances in Food Regulations of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance will also be amended simultaneously to incorporate the above-mentioned safety standards.

PRESENT POSITION

23. We are now consulting the relevant trades and professionals on our proposal. We will introduce the regulation into the Legislative Council as soon as practicable.

Environment and Food Bureau

October 2000