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**Panel on Health Services and
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Minutes of joint meeting
held on Monday, 24 February 2003 at 10:45 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

Members Present : Panel on Health Services

- # Dr Hon LO Wing-lok (Chairman)
- # Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon CHAN Kwok-keung
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
- # Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Dr Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Hon WONG Sing-chi

Members Absent : Panel on Health Services

- # Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP

Dr Hon TANG Siu-tong, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, JP

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Hon James TO Kun-sun
Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP

(# Also members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene)

Public Officers Attending : Dr E K YEOH, JP
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

Mr Thomas YIU, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Health)

Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Food & Environment Hygiene)

Mr Tony CHAN
Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Health)

Dr P Y LEUNG, JP
Deputy Director of Health

Dr TSE Lai-yin
Consultant (Community Medicine), Department of Health

Dr W M KO, JP
Director (Professional Services & Public Affairs), Hospital Authority

Dr S P MAK, JP
Deputy Director (Food & Public Health)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Mr K K LIU
Deputy Director, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

Clerk in Attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Assistant Secretary (2) 4

Staff in : Miss Mary SO
Attendance Senior Assistant Secretary (2) 8

I. Election of Chairman

Dr LO Wing-lok was elected Chairman of the joint-meeting.

II. Issues relating to the recent outbreak of pneumonia cases in Guangdong Province and the recent detection of two cases of human H5N1 infection in Hong Kong
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1276/02-03(01))

2. Members noted a written response from the Administration to the questions raised by Mr Fred LI about the two recent cases of Hong Kong residents contracting H5N1 avian influenza virus (LC Paper No. CB(2)1293/02-03(01)) tabled at the meeting.

3. Deputy Director of Health (DDH) said that in light of the recent pneumonia outbreak in Guangdong Province, the Department of Health (DH) had immediately contacted the health authorities in the Mainland on 10 February 2003 to understand the latest situation. The Guangdong health authorities replied on 11 February 2003 that 305 atypical pneumonia cases had occurred in some areas of Guangdong Province from 16 November 2002 to 9 February 2003, and five persons had died from the disease. There was no evidence that the pneumonia was caused by anthrax or plague. On 19 February 2003, the Guangdong municipality officials declared that the atypical pneumonia was caused by Chlamydiae which were intracellular bacteria that could be transmitted via respiratory aerosols, direct contact with patients, infected poultry and birds. They also declared that although the rising trend of atypical pneumonia had been curbed, it was not yet completely under control. This was due to the facts that February was the peak season for the occurrence of respiratory diseases, and that there was mass population movement consequent upon term opening of schools and the return of workers after the Lunar New Year holidays.

4. In the light of the rising incidents of atypical pneumonia in Guangdong Province, DDH said that DH had stepped up surveillance on the disease in Hong Kong through a network of hospitals, clinics and laboratories in both the private

and public sectors. Through this surveillance system, a nine-year old boy and his 33-year old father were detected to have influenza AH5N1 infection on 19 and 20 February 2003 respectively. DDH pointed out that the boy went to Fujian with his mother and two sisters during 25 January 2003 to 9 February 2003, and his father joined them on 31 January 2003. The boy's eight-year old sister had onset of pneumonia on 28 January 2003 and died on 4 February 2003 in Fujian. The exact cause of the death of the girl could not be determined. On the other hand, the boy had onset of low grade fever, cough and runny nose on 9 February 2003, and was admitted to Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) on 12 February 2003. The boy's father had acute onset of high fever, blood-stained sputum and myalgia on 7 February 2003, and was also admitted to PMH on 11 February 2003. The boy had since recovered, but his father died on 17 February 2003. Nasopharyngeal aspirates from the boy and his father were tested positive for AH5N1 infection on 19 and 20 February 2003 respectively. As the father was outside Hong Kong during the normal incubation period of influenza, which was one to four days, DH believed that he contracted the disease outside Hong Kong. The virus genes found in the boy was purely avian in origin. In the absence of human influenza gene segments in the virus of the boy, DH believed that the risk of human to human transmission of AH5N1 was low. There was, therefore, no cause for panic. Results of the genetic analysis on the influenza AH5N1 virus found in the father would be available in the next few days. In the meantime, DH would continue to keep in close contact with the Ministry of Health in Beijing to keep abreast of latest developments.

5. Mr Michael MAK asked about the measures taken by DH to protect Hong Kong residents from contracting communicable diseases in the Mainland. Mr MAK further asked why H5 avian influenza virus that was able to cause fatal disease in human was only found in Hong Kong.

6. DDH responded that DH had been reminding the public, through various public education activities, on precautionary measures against communicable diseases, such as to build up a good body immunity by having a balanced diet, adequate exercise and rest, and observe good personal and environmental hygiene. The two Port Health Centres under DH also provided a "one-stop" service to outbound travellers which included travel health risks assessment, immunisations, preventive medications and advice on risk-reduction measures. Timely information on various travel health topics and health alerts was also provided to the public through the bilingual travel health website which was updated at least weekly. DDH further said that DH operated an effective surveillance system to monitor the situation of communicable diseases through a network of hospitals, clinics and laboratories in both the private and public sectors which enabled it to detect suspected cases of communicable diseases early and prevent them from spreading. In view of the recent outbreak of pneumonia cases in Guangdong

Province and the information obtained from Mainland health authorities, DH had enhanced and refined surveillance on the disease. Information on pneumonia cases was submitted by all public and private hospitals to DH on a weekly basis. From the information collected, no unusual patterns of influenza-like illness and respiratory tract infection, including pneumonia had been observed in the past few weeks.

7. As to Mr MAK's second question, Deputy Director, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (DD, AFCD) said that H5 had been reported in other places but only the type found in Hong Kong had infected human. It remained unclear scientifically why this was the case.

8. Mr Tommy CHEUNG asked the following questions -

- (a) Whether H5 avian influenza virus could be transmitted from humans to humans; and if so, whether there was any drug which could effectively treat people infected with the virus;
- (b) In view of an additional rest day for live poultry retailers to be set on the 10th day of each month and would commence at 12 noon, whether the same cut-off time for completion of the slaughtering of live poultry remaining could be adopted for the existing rest day which fell on the 25th day of each month; and
- (c) Whether consideration could be given to changing the four rest days per month for the live chicken wholesale sector, which currently fell on the 5th, 15th, 24th and 25th, to the 9th, 10th, 24th and 25th of each month. This was to obviate the need for the live chicken wholesale sector to introduce two more rest days in a month on top of the additional one market rest day on the 10th day of each month by the live poultry retailers.

9. DDH responded that studies on the spread of avian flu showed that the main mode of transmission of H5 avian influenza virus was from bird to human, and human to human transmission was very inefficient, i.e. human to human transmission could occur but with very low propensity for pandemic. The cases of human infection of H5 avian influenza virus in Hong Kong were first identified in 1997. Since then, there had been no human infection of H5 avian influenza virus in Hong Kong until the two recent cases. However, the sequencing of genes of the H5 avian influenza virus found in the boy was different from that of the H5 avian influenza virus which infected humans in 1997. DDH further said that it was most likely that the boy and his deceased father got infected with H5 avian influenza virus from contacting chickens in the Mainland, based on the following

information collected thus far. Namely, both the boy and his deceased father were outside Hong Kong during the normal incubation period of influenza, which was one to four days; the fact that the genes found in the boy were purely avian in origin; no close family members of the boy, save his deceased father, had H5 avian virus infection; and there had been no similar cases of infection detected in Hong Kong between 9 February 2003, the day the boy returned to Hong Kong, and to date. DDH further said that Amantadine was commonly used in the treatment of H5N1 infections. DDH, however, pointed out that although H5N1 virus had been shown to be sensitive to Amantadine but resistance could occur. The effectiveness of Amantadine treatment depended on many factors, such as pre-existing medical conditions of the patients and the stage of the disease when the treatment was started.

10. As regards the rest day for live poultry retailers, Deputy Director, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (DD, FEHD) said that introducing an additional rest day at retail markets was one of the recommendations proposed in the 2002 Avian Influenza Investigation Report to reduce further the virus load in the retail markets. FEHD had been communicating with the live poultry retail trade representatives since May 2002 on the proposed new measure. At the last regular meeting with the trade on 20 February 2003, FEHD put across the proposal of an additional rest day per month at retail markets. The representatives of the live poultry retailers expressed that the proposal would have an impact on the trade. Nevertheless, they appreciated the significance of the new measure in the prevention of outbreak of avian flu. The retail trade representatives however counter-proposed that the cleansing and disinfection of the premises should be postponed to commence at 12 noon, instead of at 12 midnight, to better meet their operational need on one hand and more effectively reduce the risk of the avian flu outbreak on the other. Although the 24-hour rest day was shown to be effective in reducing the virus load in markets, as evidenced by studies conducted by the University of Hong Kong (HKU), FEHD acceded to the trade's request that the additional rest day should commence at 12 noon. It was also the majority's consensus at the meeting that the additional rest day be set on the 10th day of each month and take effect from March 2003 onwards.

11. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that to his understanding, no agreement had been reached on 20 February 2003 regarding the introduction of an additional market rest day on the 10th of each month to take effect from March 2003 onwards. Mr CHEUNG then asked whether the live chicken wholesale sector had been consulted on their monthly rest days, if one additional market rest day was introduced on the 10th of each month; and if so; whether any agreement had been reached on the monthly rest days of the live chicken wholesale sector.

12. DD, FEHD responded that representatives from AFCD and the live chicken

wholesale sector had also attended the meeting on 20 February 2003 to discuss the proposal of introducing an additional market rest day on the 10th of each month to take effect from March 2003 onwards. The majority of trade representatives attending the meeting were supportive of the new measure, including changing the monthly rest days of live chicken wholesalers to the 9th, 10th, 24th and 25th of each month from March 2003 onwards to dovetail with the rest days of the retail markets. FEHD would notify all live chicken retailers and explain to them the implementation details shortly.

13. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that to his understanding, neither the representatives from the live poultry retail trade had agreed to introduce an additional market rest day on the 10th of each month, nor those from the live chicken wholesale sector to change their monthly rest days to the 9th, 10th, 24th and 25th of each month from March 2003 onwards. Mr CHEUNG further said that he was unconvinced that a 24-hour rest day for live poultry retailers was more effective in reducing the risk of avian flu outbreak than if the rest day was less than 24 hours, and requested the Administration to provide evidence to substantiate such a claim. In his view, a better approach would be for the retailers to stop selling live poultry at 0800 hours, for cleansing and disinfection to commence at 12 noon, and for selling of live poultry to resume at 0800 hours on the following day. If that was not possible, the Administration should at least change the time for completion of the slaughtering of the live poultry remaining for the existing rest day which fell on the 25th of each month to before 12 noon, as most restaurants only opened at 1100 to 12 noon. Mr WONG Yung-kan echoed views similar to those expressed by Mr CHEUNG on the need for a 24-hour rest day at retail markets.

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14. The Chairman requested the Administration to provide evidence on why a 24-hour rest day for live poultry retailers was more effective in reducing the risk of avian flu outbreak than if the rest day was less than 24 hours, as well as a written response to the suggestions made by Mr CHEUNG in paragraph 13 above. The requested information should be submitted to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene for follow-up.

15. Dr David CHU asked whether the Administration had established a notification mechanism on communicable diseases with the Mainland and the World Health Organisation (WHO); and if not, when would it intend to do so.

16. DDH responded that there already existed a mechanism between DH and the Ministry of Health in Beijing for the exchange of information on communicable diseases, including exchange of reports on selected infectious diseases on a monthly basis. Apart from this, DH also maintained close contact with health authorities of neighbouring places such as Guangdong Province,

Zhuhai and Shenzhen Special Economics Zones and Macau on the surveillance, prevention and control of communicable diseases. As for outbreaks of diseases in the Mainland which were of public health concerns in Hong Kong, DH would immediately communicate with the Ministry of Health in Beijing by various means to obtain the latest information. In view of the recent pneumonia outbreak in Guangdong Province, DH would further strengthen its communication with the health authorities in the Mainland, and continue to maintain close contact with WHO. DDH further said that DH maintained an international network for the exchange of epidemiological information through WHO. Currently, WHO required notification of all cases of cholera, yellow fever and plague and routine report of statistics on cases of rabies, leprosy, acute flaccid paralysis and virus isolation data, including influenza. DH would also submit a report to WHO on incidents involving infectious disease outbreaks which might have global public health significance.

17. Responding to the Chairman's enquiry on the responsiveness of the Mainland's surveillance system on communicable diseases, Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) said that the Ministry of Health in Beijing had responded very swiftly to DH's requests for more information on the recent outbreak of pneumonia cases in Guangdong Province and the recent detection of two cases of human H5N1 infection in Hong Kong. However, due to varying surveillance systems on communicable diseases of different localities in the Mainland, it would not always be possible for the Ministry of Health in Beijing to provide DH with all the information requested. In the light of this and having regard to the fact that Hong Kong people did not only travel to the Mainland, it was best for Hong Kong people to rely on its own surveillance system on communicable diseases managed by DH.

18. On the two rest days at retail markets, SHWF considered such an arrangement necessary for the prevention of outbreak of avian flu, particularly during the months of February to March and July to August when influenza was more prevalent. Nevertheless, he agreed to review the new arrangement to reduce disruption to the trade as far as possible.

19. SHWF further said that further outbreaks of avian flu could not be entirely ruled out, as H5 avian influenza viruses existed as part of nature and could not be eliminated. For instance, there was no way to prevent wild birds and migratory birds, which were natural hosts of influenza viruses, to transmit the viruses to other birds. In fact, some dead wild birds found in Mai Po had been discovered to carry H5 avian influenza viruses. It was also highly plausible that the death of a number of waterfowl in Penfold Park last year was due to avian flu infection, as test results on the dead waterfowl detected H5 avian influenza virus. Furthermore, H5 avian influenza viruses had been found to be continuously and

rapidly evolving. SHWF, however, pointed out that the risk of H5 avian influenza virus affecting humans was low. Therefore, the best strategy was to minimise the chance of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong and to control the spread of the virus when it was detected, which included the following -

- (a) Improving the biosecurity standard of local farms to reduce the risk of incursion of virus onto farms;
- (b) Introducing one additional rest day at retail stalls/shops to further reduce the virus load; and
- (c) Increasing the use of vaccination as an adjunct to control H5N1 avian influenza virus in Hong Kong.

In respect of (c), SHWF said that discussion was currently being held with the Inspection and Quarantine Bureau of the Mainland on vaccinating all chickens before these chickens could be exported to Hong Kong.

20. Mr WONG Yung-kan welcomed the various measures taken by the Administration to minimise the chance of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong and to control the spread of the virus when it was detected, but hoped that it would listen to the views of the trade in such endeavour. Mr WONG also hoped that one government department could be assigned for disseminating information on matters relating to avian flu, in order to avoid confusing the public, which, in turn, would impact adversely on the live poultry trade.

21. SHWF responded that the trade had always been consulted on any proposed measures to reduce the risk of recurrence of H5 avian influenza infection before implementation, and the trade had always been very receptive to the proposed measures, which they understood were crucial for the survival of their business. As to assigning one government department to disseminate information on matters relating to avian flu, SHWF said that he did not see the need for such as government departments concerned, i.e. AFCD, DH and FEHD, were under the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau which he oversaw.

22. Mr WONG Yung-han said that in view of the much improved biosecurity at local chicken farms, the risk of recurrence of H5 avian influenza infection in Hong Kong could be further reduced if the supply of live chickens to Hong Kong could come more from the local farms. In the light of this, Mr WONG hoped that the Administration could do more to help the local live chicken industry.

23. Mr Fred LI and Dr David CHU welcomed the proposed measure that all live chickens from the Mainland must be vaccinated before entering Hong Kong,

and urged that this be done expeditiously. Mr LI further said that the Administration should refrain from saying that the two recent human H5N1 infection cases were not caused by transmission of H5N1 virus from human to human, as the results of the genetic analysis on the influenza AH5N1 virus found in the father were not yet available. Mr LI pointed out that merely relying on the Ministry of Health in Beijing to notify Hong Kong on any outbreak of infectious disease in the Mainland was not enough. A better approach would be to require local health authorities in the Mainland to report such to the Ministry of Health in Beijing. Mr LI pointed out that if such a notification mechanism was in place, the exact cause of death of the girl in Fujian could be determined.

24. DDH clarified that DH had never said that there was no possibility of transmission of H5N1 virus from human to human in the two recent human H5N1 infection cases. It only said that the chance of it happening was low, having regard to the fact that the virus genes found in the boy were purely avian in origin. DDH further said that even if there were human influenza gene segments found in the virus of the deceased father, it still did not mean that there would be an outbreak of human H5N1 infection as the transmission of H5N1 virus from human to human was very inefficient.

25. SHWF said that the notification mechanism suggested by Mr Fred LI in paragraph 23 above was not workable, as not all local health authorities in the Mainland had a very sensitive and comprehensive surveillance on infectious diseases. Nevertheless, the Administration would continue to discuss with the health authorities in the Mainland on ways to strengthen the existing notification mechanism on infectious diseases of public health concern in Hong Kong.

26. Mr Tommy CHEUNG asked the following questions -

- (a) Whether the Administration had started discussion with the Mainland authorities on the vaccination of Mainland chickens before these chickens could be exported to Hong Kong; and if so, what type of vaccine would be used; and
- (b) Whether consideration could be given to segregating the local chickens from the Mainland chickens at the wholesale level.

Mr CHEUNG further said that poor ventilation and cramped condition of retail markets would increase the risk of outbreak of avian flu, as evidenced by the fact that several outbreaks of avian influenza after 1997 invariably occurred in old retail markets which were very crowded and with very poor ventilation. In the light of this, Mr CHEUNG was of the view that retail stalls presently located in old markets should be relocated to a market with better ventilation and more

spacious surrounding. Mr CHEUNG was also of the view that the Administration should consult with the live chicken wholesalers on the four-day rest days per month at wholesale markets, as to his understanding, no consensus had been reached on setting the four rest days on the 9th, 10th, 24th and 25th of each month.

27. Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food responded that he had no details of the vaccine to be used on Mainland chickens for export to Hong Kong, as preliminary discussion with the Mainland authorities concerned on the vaccination requirement had only just commenced. As to Mr CHEUNG's second question, DD, AFCD said that discussion had been held with the live chicken wholesale sector on segregating local chickens from Mainland chickens at the wholesale level. The initial response from the sector was one of reservation, as there was concern that this might have negative impact on the sector.

28. Noting that some of the 305 people afflicted with atypical pneumonia in Guangdong Province recently were healthcare workers, Mr Michael MAK asked whether any testing had been or would be conducted by Guangdong health authorities to see whether these healthcare workers had H5N1 virus. Mr MAK further asked whether any testing would be conducted on the Hong Kong side to find out whether people working in the live poultry trade had H5N1 virus.

29. DDH responded that he did not know the answer to Mr MAK's first question. Moreover, DH had not requested Guangdong health authorities to find out whether people afflicted with atypical pneumonia had H5N1 virus. However, he believed that the Mainland side would take into consideration of the two recent cases of Hong Kong residents contracting H5N1 in their investigation of the outbreak of atypical pneumonia in some areas of Guangdong Province. As to Mr MAK's second question, DDH agreed to consider conducting a study to find out the prevalence of H5N1 antibodies among poultry workers.

30. Mr WONG Yung-kun asked whether the Administration regularly conducted testing of wild birds and migratory birds to see if they had H5N1 virus; and if so, whether the testing results could be provided to members.

31. DD, AFCD responded that collecting faecal samples of live wild birds and migratory birds and the dead bodies of wild birds and migratory birds at Mai Po and other gathering places of these birds to see whether they had H5N1 virus was an ongoing process conducted by AFCD. To date, only wild birds and migratory birds found dead at Penfold Park, Kowloon Park, Lok Ma Chau and Chep Lap Kok had been found to have H5N1 virus, and that only those found dead at Penfold Park and Kowloon had been proved to have died from H5N1 infection. DD, AFCD stressed that the number of dead wild and migratory birds found to

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have H5N1 virus was low. DD, AFCD further said that arrangement had been made with HKU to analyse the H5N1 virus found in wild birds and migratory birds with that found in chickens at farms and markets. At the request of the Chairman, AFCD undertook to provide information on wild birds and migratory birds contracting H5N1 virus since 1997.

32. In summing up, the Chairman said that the following issues should be followed up by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene and the Panel on Health Services -

- (a) Rest days at wholesale and retail markets;
- (b) Notification mechanism between DH and the health authorities in the Mainland on communicable diseases; and
- (c) Vaccination of Mainland chickens for exporting to Hong Kong.

33. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 12:25 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
20 June 2003