

**For discussion
on 9 January 2004**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Policy Initiatives of Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Purpose

The 2004 Policy Agenda just issued lists the Government's new and on-going initiatives over the next three and a half years. This note elaborates, where applicable, on the initiatives affecting the Bureau in the 2004 Policy Agenda. Where necessary, it also gives an account on the position reached on initiatives relating to food safety and environmental hygiene covered in the 2003 Policy Agenda.

2004 Policy Agenda

Caring and Just Society

Mission and Vision

2. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) is committed and accountable to building a caring and healthy society. In our future, we see a community celebrating their rich diversity and recognizing the different strengths of each individual. Family solidarity and a network of mutual care, trust, support and reciprocity embraces all individuals and nurtures their healthy development. Policies and systems of health care, social, food safety and environmental hygiene and a safety net are in place to enable and enhance everyone's participation in economic and social life with dignity and self-reliance.

Goals

3. To fulfil our mission and vision, we aim to achieve the following goals-

- Protect and promote the health of the community
- Assure the safety and quality of our food and provide quality environmental hygiene services

- Recreate a health care system which provides lifelong holistic care, while being affordable and financially sustainable
- Provide care and assistance for the physical and psychosocial well-being of the elderly
- Assist the disadvantaged, the poor and the unemployed with an emphasis on enhancing, not impeding, their will to self-reliance
- Promote the well-being and interests of people with disabilities
- Enable women to fully realise their due status, rights and opportunities in all aspects of life.

4. Our mission is to enhance the well-being of every member of the community to build a healthy and caring society. The changing local landscape and the lessons learnt from recent challenges have led us to undertake strategic reflections to re-affirm our directions. With an ageing population, rapid globalization and economic restructuring, and the persistent threat of new and emerging infectious diseases to public health, sustainable social development must be a key goal of our health and welfare policy. We recognize that our policy must take on a broader perspective, by taking a balanced approach to development that will simultaneously address the human, social, natural and physical dimensions and inclusive of broader partnership base. Individuals, families and communities, as well as professional and business sectors, must all be engaged in exercising our social responsibilities for strengthening the health and social fabric of our society. We must take a social investment approach in building a more inclusive and participatory society through investing in capacity building of personal and community capabilities.

5. We recognize the need to work within the confines of resources generated by a low tax based regime. In pursuing our mission, our policies need to be fair within generations, equitable between generations and sustainable across generations. Our objective is to expand capacity, extend partnerships and build consensus. In this connection, we would invest in our human capital and develop our infrastructure to help individuals to strengthen their personal assets both in terms of their health and life skills.

6. Health is a personal resource that also affects our collective community well-being. The protection and maintenance of health is therefore a personal responsibility. Individuals should take more responsibility for their own health, through more active involvement in decisions and investments in their health. This includes ensuring that one observes a healthy lifestyle, educates oneself on food safety and nutritional value as a consumer, develops habits in keeping the environment clean, takes preventive measures and seeks appropriate care when required, and contributes towards making the systems sustainable.

7. We are aware that Government efforts alone have never been adequate in bringing about social and health changes and ensuring well-being for all. We aim to create an environment in which all people are provided equal opportunities to develop their potential to the full thereby enabling them to take responsibilities for themselves and to participate and contribute to our economic and social life. Our approach is about creating the conditions for people/communities to maximize their potentials/capabilities, with the government acting as an enabler, a supporter and a facilitator.

8. On the health front, the Government will ensure quality, equitable, efficient, cost-effective and accessible health care systems and to organize the infrastructure for coordinated health care delivery through an interface of public and private systems (e.g. in areas of common treatment protocol, information sharing, product differentiation and new health care products). We need to target subsidies to ensure that we will offer protection to the community from significant financial risks that may arise from catastrophic or prolonged illnesses and avail affordable quality care to the disadvantaged in our community. As the World Health Organization puts it, for every Government, it means establishing the best and fairest health system possible.

9. Health and food safety are inextricably linked. On the safe food and clean environment fronts, public health protection should always take precedence. We will ensure a comprehensive and integrated approach in food chain management (i.e. the feed to table policy) by putting in place the necessary infrastructure; a coherent, effective and dynamic food policy on the basis of scientific evidence and risk analysis (e.g. drawing up standards and ensuring compliance through enforcement); and enhancing private-public partnership and participation by stakeholders during the process. While legal and regulatory frameworks are necessary instruments of last resort to ensure and raise standards and provide necessary safeguards, effective protection for public health can only be

achieved through the concerted actions from all parties, collaboration across sectors and shared responsibilities between the sectors and the general public.

10. On the social welfare front, we aim to take the approach of helping people to help themselves, focus on maximizing their potentials, extend our tripartite relationships with the third sector as well as with the corporate sector in furthering the exercise of corporate social responsibilities.

11. Society is made up of individuals, families, communities and social institutions. Changing times will naturally test the capacities of these groups to cope and take control. The ability of individuals to maximize their own potentials, take possession of their own lives and work to strengthen their life skills and build up their capacity will be vital to coping with changing circumstances and life demands. The ability of the family to provide nurture and care, and be the haven for individuals at times of need is important and needs to be supported. The existence of informal mutual help and collaboration networks in the community forms the basis of a vibrant and inclusive society.

12. Government acts as the facilitator in the process of capacity building for all levels. In this connection, we must shift from the “service provision” approach to a “social investment” concept and approach. Under the “social investment” approach, we would strengthen the capacities and capabilities of individuals, families and communities, and foster self-help, mutual help, networking and support, and encourage giving in terms of donations and volunteerism, as well as promote active and healthy ageing and rethinking how our community can better support our elderly people. Our social programmes will need to be re-oriented from the current model of encouraging passive recipients of resources and services to those that involve people in active learning and problem solving, which would help instill in them self-esteem, self respect and a sense of control. Such paradigm shifts would encourage self-reliance and self-betterment so that they can become productive, participative and contributive members of a more inclusive society, and build up our human capital and social capital and strengthen intergenerational solidarity and cohesion at the societal level.

Initiatives

13. In achieving our goal on food safety and environmental

hygiene, we aim to implement a number of new initiatives in 2004 and beyond. These new initiatives are briefly described below.

Regularise the wholesaling of live fish by implementing a permit scheme for wholesale fish stalls

14. Following the discovery of *vibrio cholerae* in fish water tanks at the retail outlets in August 2003, we considered it appropriate to introduce new legislative measures to bring the wholesale activities of live marine fish under the management and control of the Fish Marketing Organization (FMO). During the interim period, there is a need for us to improve our capability to monitor the quality of water used for the purpose of keeping live marine fish throughout the whole food supply chain. We have therefore proposed to issue permits to all wholesale fish traders operating at the FMO markets or elsewhere in order that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) could impose conditions on the water quality of the fish tanks and their operating environment. As a first step, the wholesaling activities of live marine fish at the Aberdeen Promenade where *vibrio cholerae* was discovered in one of the fish stalls had already been brought under the management of FMO on 1 December 2003. The malpractice of taking unhygienic seawater from the Aberdeen Typhoon Shelter for keeping live marine fish has now ceased.

Introduce a closed season for fishing and fisheries protection areas to conserve local fisheries resources

15. Concurrent with our attempts to introduce a licensing scheme for fishing vessels to promote the sustainable development of our fishing industry, we propose to introduce a closed season for fishing and fisheries protection areas within Hong Kong waters for the purpose of conserving local fisheries resources. Following consultation with the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (LegCo FSEH Panel) on our broad policy objectives, we are now in the process of drawing up detailed legislative proposals.

Review the regulatory framework for animals, birds and fish for the purpose of enhancing health and food safety

16. The Public Health (Animals and Birds) Ordinance (Cap. 139) and Regulations were enacted some 60 years ago and the provisions contained therein, which have remained unchanged since enactment, may not be able to deal with the present day situation in preventing veterinary and zoonotic diseases. For example, the Ordinance does not cover fish

and amphibians such as frogs and both of which may introduce disease. There is also no provision which may enable the Administration to exercise import control on animal products, fodder used for animals and birds, etc., and these may also introduce disease. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the SARS outbreak in 2003, we considered it important that we should enhance our capability to prevent and control communicable diseases and to improve veterinary public health. We therefore intend to conduct a comprehensive review of our present regulatory framework governing the various aspects of trading, import control and surveillance, and licensing of animals, birds and fish.

Evaluate the implementation of the concept of “From-feed-to-table” to ensure food safety

17. Traditionally, the food safety regime is targeted at the intermediary stages of the food chain, i.e. when food is processed for consumption. In recent years, we have been adopting the modern global concept of “From-feed-to-table” which takes into account the various risk factors along the entire food chain from where the food is grown or produced, distributed at the wholesale and retail level, to where it is consumed. Effective implementation of this concept will enable us to give due consideration to farm hygiene and management, feed to food animals, proper use of pesticides and veterinary chemicals, and disease prevention and control of food animals, in our regulatory regime so as to prevent food-borne hazards and protect public health from the risk posed by food animal diseases. As part of our on-going efforts to enhance the overall strategy to ensure food safety, we will evaluate the implementation of the concept of “From-feed-to-table” with a view to identifying areas for improvement, especially the control interfaces along the food chain.

Progress Report on Implementation of 2003 Policy Initiatives

Caring and Just Society

18. In January 2003, Members were informed of HWFB’s new initiatives on food safety and environmental health as contained in the LegCo FSEH Panel Paper entitled “A Caring and Healthy Society”. These new initiatives covered the following areas -

- (a) Develop a multi-pronged strategy to minimize the risk of avian influenza outbreaks.

- (b) Improve overall food safety and control on agriculture and fisheries operations that have an impact on public health or the environment.

Progress Made/Present Position

19. In respect of the new initiative at paragraph 18(a) above, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has implemented a territory-wide H5 vaccination and surveillance programme for all chicken farms in Hong Kong since June 2003. We also reached an agreement with the Mainland authority on the vaccination of chickens for export to Hong Kong to ensure the similar levels of protection to both imported Mainland chickens and locally produced chickens. All birds available in the local market will by mid-January 2004 have been vaccinated. The need for continuous vaccination of chickens will be closely monitored.

20. During the year, we upgraded the biosecurity standards in local farms to prevent the introduction of the virus to farms; further improved the hygiene conditions in markets to guard against the harbouring of the virus, and put into place two rest days per month at retail outlets to reduce the viral load, if any.

21. In addition to our on-going H5 surveillance programme covering local chicken farms, imported chickens, the wholesale market and retail outlets, we have also extended the programme to wild birds, waterfowls in recreational parks and pet birds in the market. This has further strengthened our capability to detect the presence of any H5 viruses in our environment and the possible re-assortment of the viruses so that responsive measures can be taken at an early stage to prevent the recurrence of outbreaks.

22. To further upgrade the current preventive measures against human infection by avian influenza viruses, we have been studying various options to reduce contacts between humans and live poultry. We plan to start a public consultation exercise on these options in 2004.

23. As regards the new initiative in paragraph 18(b) above, the Administration has achieved the following progress -

Nutrition Labelling

- (a) In November 2003, we published a public consultation

document setting out the Administration's proposals to introduce a mandatory nutrition labelling scheme by phases. The consultation period will end on 31 January this year and we will take into consideration the views expressed by the public as well as the trade before we make a firm decision on the way forward.

Genetically Modified Food

- (b) A mandatory pre-market safety assessment on genetically modified (GM) food to be supplemented by a voluntary labelling system would be implemented to address the community's concern about the safety of GM food. We are now working on the details of the pre-market safety assessment scheme and we intend to launch a public consultation exercise in due course.

Food Labelling

- (c) In December 2003, we enacted the Food Adulteration (Artificial Sweeteners) (Amendment) Regulation 2003 and the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) (Amendment) Regulation 2003 to regulate the presence of sweeteners in food in accordance with international standards. We are now proceeding with the exercise to update the existing food legislation in respect of the labelling of food additives and allergenic food ingredients.

Protection of Fisheries Resources and Pesticides

- (d) Following consultations with the LegCo FSEH Panel, we are now finalizing detailed legislative proposals to regulate fishing activities within Hong Kong waters and to control the use of pesticides.

Organic Farming

- (e) To promote the sustainable development of the cultivation industry, AFCD and the Vegetable Marketing Organization have entered into partnership with a number of Non-government Organisations by providing funding support to establish the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre to develop local organic vegetable standards and a certification and

inspection protocol to ensure that food produced through organic farming is properly recognized.

Other Achievements

24. During the year, we also achieved the following new initiatives which were not mentioned in the 2003 Policy Agenda -

Team Clean Initiatives

- (a) We have brought about a heightened awareness among the community of the need to improve and maintain a high standard of personal hygiene and cleanliness by increasing the fixed penalty for cleanliness offences from \$600 to \$1,500. The increased penalty, together with our “zero tolerance” enforcement approach, should result in further improvements to the state of cleanliness and hygiene in Hong Kong.
- (b) We launched a consultation exercise on our proposal to impose community service orders for repeat cleanliness offenders. The consultation period came to an end on 23 December 2003 and we received over 1,300 submissions from members of the public. We will analyse the public views and feedbacks on our proposal and will make a decision on the way forward early this year.

Aberdeen Promenade

- (c) We successfully resolved a serious public health hazard at the Aberdeen Promenade where the wholesale fish traders were found to obtain dirty and unhygienic seawater from the Aberdeen Typhoon Shelter for keeping live marine fish. We made urgent and speedy arrangements for the FMO to take over the management responsibility of the Aberdeen Promenade so as to bring the wholesale activities of live marine fish under the present regulatory framework. The wholesale fish traders at Aberdeen have now stopped the undesirable practice of taking unhygienic seawater from the Typhoon Shelter. Upon the issue of permits by the FEHD, all the wholesale live marine fish traders now operating at the FMO-managed wholesale market at Aberdeen have installed proper filtration and disinfection systems for their fish tanks.

Dengue Fever

- (d) We were successful in our attempt to prevent an outbreak of dengue fever in Hong Kong, following the implementation of an enhanced vector surveillance programme in January 2003. The Anti-mosquito Steering Committee, which was formed in October 2002 to tackle the dengue fever problem, established ovitrap indices to gauge the extent of the problem in different regions of Hong Kong. The ovitrap indices have provided a most reliable indication for the relevant departments to effect control measures to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds.

Co-operation Arrangements with the Mainland

- (e) We signed a Co-operation Arrangement with the State General Administration for Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine in November 2003 to provide for closer co-operation, collaboration, liaison and exchange of information with the relevant Mainland authorities over port health control measures, the inspection and quarantine of food, live food animals, plants and animal products to ensure food safety and protect public health. The Co-operation Arrangement provides for an annual liaison meeting of senior officials from both sides to examine issues of mutual interest and regular expert group meetings to study specialized issues and testing techniques.

Conclusion

25. We will consult the LegCo FSEH Panel when we have formulated detailed proposals in respect of our new policy initiatives for implementation.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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