

Hong Kong Veterinary Association

Response to the Consultation Paper Dated April 2004

**Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction to
Minimise the Risk of Human Infection**

1. The Hong Kong Veterinary Association has carefully studied the strategic proposals presented in the paper and would like to offer the following summarized views.
2. The involvement of the veterinary profession in the whole poultry meat supply chain from farms to tables at both policy making and implementation levels is deemed to be absolutely essential, no matter what approach the government may take eventually. Veterinarians are the only professional people with comprehensive and in-depth university training to deal with all public health aspects of the poultry meat supply chain. No other disciplines of training can replace the veterinarians' role in providing knowledge-based professional advice and clinical-based technical support concerning veterinary public health. The significance of the involvement of the veterinary profession in ensuring a safe poultry meat supply is evident from the current practices in China and most, if not all, overseas developed countries. The Hong Kong Veterinary Association, therefore, urges the Hong Kong SAR Government to involve the veterinary profession in its planning and implementation processes for a safe poultry meat supply in Hong Kong.
3. The approaches that the Hong Kong SAR Government takes to minimize the risk of human infection are different from those that are targeted at zero human transmission and infection. All potential infection sources must be eliminated so as to guarantee zero human transmission and infection which, in fact, is unrealistic in the Hong Kong situation. Therefore, the Hong Kong Veterinary Association suggests that the Hong Kong SAR Government re-considers its objectives before any final decision is made.
4. Although the "cold-chain" approach is able to minimize the contact between the public and live poultry, it is impossible to achieve zero human transmission and infection, since other potential Avian Influenza (AI) sources will not be eliminated

concurrently. Migratory birds, non-poultry birds and cross-border (or overseas) traveling may bring in new infection. **Further, the socio-economic and health impacts of such an approach should not be undermined. This approach will upset the traditional but still popular dining culture in Hong Kong which happens to be a major selling point for our tourist industry. The Hong Kong SAR Government must also be** fully prepared to deal with other life-threatening pathogens such as *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella* which continue to be found in various types of central poultry meat processing systems in many overseas developed countries and are still the predominant food-borne pathogens affecting human life worldwide. More importantly, given time, the approach may also encourage illegal and other uncontrolled sources of AI entry, of which the public health impacts would be far more devastating. Professor Robert G Webster of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in his recent public speech representing the WHO has clearly pointed out that a central poultry slaughter system was not necessary in Hong Kong at this stage, while commending the Hong Kong SAR Government on its success of preventing AI incursion through the existing AI surveillance and biosecurity systems.

5. The “freshly slaughtered chickens” approach may retain our unique dining culture but would still allow the drawbacks of the “cold-chain” approach. Although there are some contacts between the general public and live poultry, the risk of human AI viruses exposure is not that high as long as effective monitoring work has been done at the critical control points before live poultry reach the general public. This can be illustrated from the different outcomes between our 1997 AI outbreak and the recent AI outbreak in our surrounding areas. The improved system of surveillance which was instigated in place in Hong Kong after our 1997 AI outbreak has surely prevented the recurrence of infection even though outbreaks occurred in ten countries and places in the Asia-Pacific region recently. The Hong Kong Veterinary Association maintains the view that the veterinary profession definitely has to be involved in the planning and operation levels should the Hong Kong SAR Government take this approach. Veterinarians should play a major role in monitoring work at all critical control points before live poultry reach the retail level. They should take charge of all ante-mortem, slaughtering and post-mortem works so as to minimize the risk of human transmission and infection and ensure a safe poultry meat supply. Further, the Hong Kong Veterinary Association would like to draw the Hong Kong SAR Government's attention to the fact that the implementation of this approach requires cautious planning as it implies the gathering of ten thousands or more live poultry at one regional slaughtering hub.

Such high stock density would certainly impose stress to the chickens kept at regional slaughtering hubs which is a pre-disposing factor for disease outbreak.

6. Finally, the Hong Kong Veterinary Association is convinced that the current strategies implemented by the Hong Kong SAR Government to manage risks associated with AI are already systemic and vigilant enough to minimize the risk of human infection on a long-term basis after considering all major epidemiologic situations and evidence available in Hong Kong and the surrounding regions. In this regard, the stepped-up surveillance programs and biosecurity measures from the farm to table have proven very successful in warding off any AI incursion during the recent raging AI outbreaks. This current practice should continue to work effectively should the Hong Kong SAR Government decide not to adopt the two proposed approaches (A and B), bearing in mind that both approaches, whilst requiring major capital expenditure of \$200 million or more, can only minimize rather than eliminate the risk of human infection. Therefore, the Hong Kong Veterinary Association strongly recommends that the Hong Kong SAR Government considers further improving the existing strategies by increasing veterinary input through the whole poultry producing process to ensure a first rate surveillance system is in place. Amongst other things, this would involve improved conditions at market stalls to avoid stress to live poultry and further provide an improved environment. All strategies should be regularly reviewed and adjusted according to the changes in both regional and global situations associated with AI.

Prepared by Veterinary Public Health Sub-committee, Hong Kong Veterinary Association.