

For information on
28 July 2005

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Disease Situation in Certain Areas of Sichuan Province

Purpose

This paper aims to brief members on the existing inspection and quarantine mechanism for imported meat as well as the follow-up actions and contingency measures taken by the authorities in Hong Kong and the Mainland to tackle the epidemic outbreak in certain areas of Sichuan province (including the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang).

Monitoring System for Imported Meat

2. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has a monitoring system for imported meat. The system adopts international practices and standards based on risk assessment. All places of origin for meat (including frozen pork) must submit to FEHD relevant information which includes legislation regulating hygiene standards of meat; animal disease situation; facilities and hygiene standards of farms, slaughterhouses and processing plants; issuing authority and accreditation details of health certificates etc to certify the hygiene standard of their meat. After passing through vetting procedures, they are then permitted to supply meat to Hong Kong on a trial basis.

3. Initially, the first three batches of meat are imported on a trial basis and subject to examination of FEHD by way of detention for examination. They will only be released to the market for sale after being given a clean bill of health in inspection reports. When FEHD is satisfied with the first three batches of meat, it would conduct examination on every batch of the subsequent three batches of imported meat. When FEHD is satisfied with the results of the first six batches of meat, subsequent imports will be subject to monitoring under the regular food surveillance system and thus to random testing at import, wholesale and retail levels.

4. The above arrangement for detention and inspection as well as random testing is in line with international practices and applicable to all exporting countries and places, including the Mainland. In determining whether to suspend the import of meat from certain countries or places, the Administration will consider from the public health and food safety perspective and make reference to guidelines issued by the relevant

international authorities. The Administration is entirely autonomous and makes these decisions on its own. In respect of animal health and public health, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) has designated certain important animal diseases such as avian influenza and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (commonly known as mad cow disease) which should be reported to OIE. OIE also issues recommendations which importing countries can follow to restrict the import of animals and animal products from countries/places affected by these diseases. *Streptococcus suis*, commonly found in pigs, is not required to be reported to the OIE. Nor has the OIE issued any guideline with regard to this disease.

Safety of Pork Imported from the Mainland

5. All pork imported from the Mainland must pass through stringent inspection and quarantine checks of the inspection and quarantine authorities and be accompanied by health certificates issued by the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) or the relevant Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau to certify that the pork is safe and fit for human consumption. The health certificate must also certify that the pigs have passed through ante-mortem inspection and have not been affected by infectious diseases. As the pork exported to Hong Kong is safe and hygienic, there is neither any need nor justification to ban all pork export from Sichuan Province to Hong Kong.

Epidemic Situation in Certain Areas of Sichuan Province

6. Since July this year, cases of pigs and sheep dying of unexplained causes have been reported in certain areas of Sichuan Province, including the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang. According to the notification of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and AQSIQ, 469 pigs and 1 goat had died as at 25 July. Information from the Ministry of Health (MoH) showed that as at noon on 26 July, a total of 117 people had been affected, of which 5 were laboratory confirmed cases. Among the patients, 24 people died, 21 were in serious condition and 5 had recovered and were discharged. All the patients had probably slaughtered or handled sick pigs before falling ill. People who came in close contact with the patients, including their family members, had not shown any symptoms of the disease. The affected patients had acute onset of high fever, headache and septicaemia. The more severe ones presented with septicaemic shock and meningitis.

7. The information is compatible with the clinical picture described in medical literature and indicates that the patients most probably became infected in the course of work.

8. Following the epidemic outbreak, the MoA has immediately despatched a team of experts on swine diseases and veterinary epidemiology to the affected areas to diagnose and investigate the epidemic as well as to supervise epidemic prevention and control work. Having examined the diseased pigs carcasses, the experts team made the initial diagnosis of porcine streptococcus and identified the causative agent as *Streptococcus suis* II. But the agents that trigger the disease are still under investigation. To combat the epidemic, the MoA, MoH and the Sichuan authorities have adopted a raft of emergency measures, stepped up epidemic surveillance and strengthened prevention and control measures to curb the spread of the disease.

Notification Mechanism Between Hong Kong and the Mainland

9. To prevent communicable animal and plant diseases from spreading across the border and to protect the health of the public as well as animals and plants, the Administration has set up a liaison and notification mechanism with AQSIQ and MoA. Under the mechanism, the authorities across the border shall notify their counterparts in case of major animal and plant infection outbreaks.

10. Infectious disease notification between the Mainland and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) takes place at two levels. Under the Tripartite Meetings of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Expert Group on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases, the three places have established an effective mechanism for sharing experience and regular exchange of information on infectious diseases. The mechanism requires the three places to exchange information about notifiable diseases on a monthly basis, to promptly report sudden upsurge of infectious diseases of unknown nature or of public health significance and to establish point-to-point communication among the health authorities via phone and fax etc.

11. For public health matters occurring outside the Guangdong Province, the Department of Health (DH) maintains close contact and effective liaison with MoH in Beijing. The MoH and the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) also undertake regular and timely communication and discussions regarding various infectious diseases and public health incidents in Hong Kong and the Mainland. Summary of information on infectious diseases and outbreak situations in other parts of the Mainland is exchanged every month.

12. Senior health officials of the Mainland, Hong Kong and Macao also meet on a regular basis to exchange views and enhance collaboration in respect of health policies and programmes, including prevention, surveillance and control of infectious diseases.

Follow-up Actions and Contingency Measures Taken by the Hong Kong Authorities

13. On being notified by MoH about the deaths of unexplained causes in Ziyang city, Sichuan on 22 July 2005, CHP immediately contacted MoH to enquire into the latest developments of the incident. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) and FEHD also contacted the AQSIQ and MoA to obtain details of the incident under the notification mechanism. To gain a better grasp of the situation, the Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environment Hygiene) met with AQSIQ in Beijing on 25 July to look into the latest developments of the incident.

14. In view of the epidemic in Sichuan Province, the FEHD has stepped up liaison with the Mainland inspection and quarantine authorities to ensure the proper operation of health certificate system. It has also strengthened inspection and quarantine work for imported live pigs and meat as well as the ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection of pigs in slaughterhouses. Moreover, the Department has also reminded its frontline staff in animal control, slaughterhouse workers, collectors of animal carcasses and food industry workers to wear suitable protective clothing and observe personal hygiene. If they feel unwell, they should stop working immediately, report to the management and consult a doctor. The FEHD has also uploaded *Safety Tips on Handling Pork* on its website. FEHD and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) have also stepped up laboratory tests on pigs produced locally and imported from the Mainland.

15. The CHP has immediately notified the Hospital Authority (HA) about the situation in Sichuan Province and reminded them to report suspected cases. In turn, the HA has alerted its accident and emergency departments about the incident and issued a letter to all doctors in the territory, with an information leaflet on *Streptococcus suis* enclosed. The letter informed the doctors of the cases of deaths in Sichuan Province and asked them to look out for suspected cases and report any unusual cases. We have also implemented our usual routine border control and port health measures. The DH also plans to despatch experts to Sichuan to take part in the epidemiological investigation.

16. The information leaflet on *Streptococcus suis* has been uploaded on CHP's website to inform the public about the background and clinical features of the disease as well as its prevention and treatment. The Centre also advises people with suspected symptoms to consult a doctor immediately.

17. In respect of handling of pig carcasses, the FEHD has reinforced inspection work at pig carcass collection points, arranged prompt removal of pig carcasses and stepped up enforcement against the illegal practice of

improperly disposing pig carcasses. With regard to local farms, AFCD has alerted pig farmers to monitor their own health condition and that of their pigs. Farmers who fall ill should consult a doctor as soon as possible. The doctor may then make report to the DH for follow-up as and when warranted. If their pigs appear to be unwell, they should inform AFCD.

Follow-up Actions and Contingency Measures Taken by the Mainland Authorities

18. To curb the spread of the epidemic, the joint working group of MoA and MoH is helping the local authorities to conduct an extensive investigation and to search for suspected patients and possibly infected pigs. The local people are also urged to refrain from slaughtering or processing diseased pig carcasses. After investigation, the Mainland authorities have confirmed that pig and sheep farms for export have not been affected by the epidemic and none of their staff have come down with infection. The pork and mutton previously exported to Hong Kong and Macao have passed through stringent inspection of the inspection and quarantine authorities and certified to be safe and hygienic.

19. In response to the concern of the HKSAR Government and as a precautionary measure, the Mainland authorities have suspended the export of pigs, sheep and their meat products from the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang with effect from 25 July. They are closely monitoring the epidemic and have stepped up disease surveillance at pig and sheep farms for export.

Conclusion

20. The Government and the authorities concerned will continue to monitor the situation closely and liaise with the Mainland authorities to keep abreast of the latest developments.

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