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Written Submission to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

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I am providing this submission in my capacity of Chair Professor of Medicine, Chairperson of the Department of Community and Family Medicine, and Director of the Centre for Nutritional Studies, School of Public Health, and Acting Director, School of Public Health, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

I have been working in the area of the relationship between nutrition and health, from a public health perspective, for many years.

The need for improvement in the area of food safety

- There are many noxious substances that can affect people's health in the short as well as long term that may occur in foods. In general microbes may affect health in the short term, while chemicals, especially those that cannot be got rid of by the body, may accumulate over the long term to affect various bodily functions and give rise to diseases. Knowledge is developing all the time regarding these risks, and dedicated personnel is required to gather the latest information, to assess the risk from foods consumed by the Hong Kong population, to inform and educate members of the public, and to effect regulations safe guarding population health. Due to the vast amount of information available and the complexity of risk assessment and the formulation of regulations, this issue

" Serving the community through quality education, caring practice, and advancement of health sciences."

cannot be handled in an amateurish way as part of existing structures. Current structures do not provide this service to a standard seen in developed countries.

- The outcome is the health of the population, and considerations regarding management issues should not interfere with this important goal. Members of the public have a right to be adequately protected.

- This issue is particularly important owing to the dependence of food source from China, whether livestock or other agricultural or manufactured products. There have been many instances of harmful effects from food products in mainland China. The true extent is unknown, but it would not be unreasonable to take the view that this is the tip of the iceberg.

Specific comments regarding the reorganization plan

- The proposal would address the above issues, by adding staff with a focus on Food Safety, that can draw on expertise in the local and overseas community regarding regulations, inspection and testing of foods, health advisories, health education. A strong health sciences and medical input is essential, including experts in epidemiology, food sciences, nutritionists, toxicologists, and public health professionals.

- In line with many developed countries who have been alerted to health hazards from foods, and who have already set up similar agencies, the proposal is timely, and should be strongly supported.

- Currently the food industry's awareness of health issues fall far behind that in countries such as the UK, where the Food Industry works with the government in promoting health, and are able to demonstrate that over recent years, the average salt content in foods have fallen by about 20% for example. (Salt is the single most important modifiable factor contributing to hypertension, and the

majority of dietary salt intake comes from the food itself.) Considerable resources are likely to be needed to deal with the trade sector in issues relating to food and health, so that the health of the population can be improved in a meaningful way, by concentrating on preventive measures. In this respect, Hong Kong is rather behind, in that trade considerations have delayed the introduction of food labeling, for example. In reality, the profit lies in health, a point that appears to have been missed by the Trade.

- In terms of management structure, it is important that one issue be dealt with by a single body, and not different aspects by different bodies. Furthermore, the regulation and inspection, and trade promotion, should be dealt with by two different bodies. The structure proposed has taken this into account, and have also injected extra manpower.
- The formation of this new body would provide a focus on addressing Food safety, analogous to the formation of the Centre for Health Protection after the SARS epidemic.

