

**For discussion
on 7 February 2006**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Food Poisoning Incidents

PURPOSE

This paper reports on the position of a series of food poisoning incidents which involved consumption of “Poon Choi” produced by a licensed food factory in Yuen Long and provides information on the regulatory regime of licensed food premises.

BACKGROUND

2. According to the provisional statistics of the Department of Health (DH), there were 975 food poisoning outbreaks in 2005, affecting about 3,500 persons, compared to 821 outbreaks and about 3,100 affected persons in 2004. Around 60% of the cases in 2005 occurred in food premises.

3. Recently, there have been concerns about the safety of “Poon Choi” following food poisoning incidents associated with its consumption.

PUBLICITY AND EDUCATION ON “POON CHOI”

4. As “Poon Choi” contains numerous ingredients and needs complicated preparation steps, it is considered as a high-risk food. Storage of “Poon Choi” at inappropriate temperatures for prolonged time allows proliferation of bacteria to levels hazardous to human health, and subsequent consumption without adequate reheating may result in food poisoning.

5. In view of the potential hazards of “Poon Choi” and its increasing popularity, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has organised since 2004 promotion and education programmes on “Poon Choi” for both the trade and the general public, including the

following –

- (a) publishing specific guidelines, leaflets and articles on safe production and consumption of “Poon Choi”;
- (b) organising a series of workshops for “Poon Choi” suppliers since November 2005;
- (c) meeting with major food trade associations, “Poon Choi” suppliers and restaurant chains in January 2006 to discuss ways to improve food safety of “Poon Choi”; and
- (d) holding a press conference followed by issue of press releases in January 2006 to urge both the food trade and the general public to pay particular attention to food safety issues related to “Poon Choi”.

REGULATORY REGIME OF FOOD BUSINESS

6. At present, FEHD conducts inspections to all licensed food premises in accordance with a risk-based inspection system, under which the frequency of inspections is determined by the risk potential of individual food premises having regard to such factors as types of food served, scope of the food business, food preparation steps, size of the customer base and previous track records. Concerning food premises which are engaged in delivery of food to customers for consumption at locations outside the licensed areas, they are required to observe specific licensing conditions to ensure that the food produced are delivered under hygienic condition and kept at suitable temperature. Food premises which produce “Poon Choi” are subject to the same inspection system and are required to observe all relevant licensing requirements/conditions as any other licensed food premises.

7. Starting from May 2005, licensed food premises are required to employ a Hygiene Manager (HM) and/or Hygiene Supervisor (HS). The main duties of an HM or HS are to assist the food premises concerned to achieve safe and hygienic operation of the business and serve as a focal point of contact with FEHD. This arrangement is implemented in parallel with FEHD’s regular inspections in order to enhance food safety in licensed food premises. In other words, the HM/HS Scheme serves as reinforcement to rather than a substitute of the existing regulatory regime.

RECENT INCIDENT

8. There was recently a series of food poisoning cases related to “Poon Choi” produced by a licensed food factory in Yuen Long which were consumed on 29 January 2006. As at 4 February 2006, we received reports from DH that a total of 441 persons were affected. The affected individuals exhibited symptoms such as fever, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and vomiting. Only one required admission to hospital. So far, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* was found in the stool of two affected persons.

FOLLOW UP ACTIONS

9. FEHD conducted prompt investigation at the food factory upon notification by DH on 30 January 2006 and collected food samples and environmental swabs for laboratory analysis. The operator closed the premises on his own accord on the same day, and undertook to FEHD that he would not re-open the premises until completion of cleansing and disinfection. In view of the increasing number of cases reported to DH and for protection of public health, the premises were ordered to close on 1 February 2006 by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) to ensure that the premises will be re-opened only when DFEH is fully satisfied that the immediate health hazard on the premises has been eliminated.

10. We will continue to carry out inspections to all licensed food premises under the risk-based inspection system and take stringent enforcement actions against non-compliance with food safety and hygiene requirements and conditions. In parallel, we will continue to conduct promotion and education programmes to raise public awareness of food safety issues in particular in relation to the prevention of food poisoning.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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