

**For discussion
On 10 November 2008**

**Legislative Council Panel on Health Services
Health aspect of melamine-tainted milk powder and dairy products**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the measures and actions taken by the Administration to provide health services and safeguard public health in response to the detection of melamine in milk powder and dairy products.

Background

2. Earlier in September this year, some infant formulae manufactured in the Mainland were found to contain melamine, and there were infants in the Mainland who suffered from kidney stones and kidney failure after consuming such melamine contaminated infant formula. Melamine is an industrial chemical used in laminates, glues, adhesives, and should not be present in food products. After learning about the incident, the Administration has taken proactive coordinated actions to safeguard public health.

Setting up of Expert Group

3. An Expert Group on Melamine Incident chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health was set up on 26 September 2008. It comprises academics, and medical, public health and food safety experts from both the public and private healthcare systems as well as representatives from a number of policy bureaux and government departments. It is tasked to assess the medium to long term impact of melamine on health and food safety, and make recommendations on follow-up treatment for affected people and investigation of cases concerned.

4. The terms of reference of the Expert Group on Melamine Incident cover five areas, namely: (1) to ensure that the manpower and supporting facilities of the public healthcare system can provide appropriate medical assessment and treatment for those citizens affected by the melamine incident, to formulate effective procedures and methods for medical assessment and treatment and to propose follow-up measures on medical and health services; (2) to assess the impact of the incident and ensure effective monitoring and inspection on dairy products and related food in order to protect the health of citizens; (3) to make proposals on the practical and expeditious means to legislate to prohibit import

and sale, and order recall of problem food; (4) to consider the most effective method, timing and content, etc to disseminate information to the public; and (5) to closely monitor the situation and development of the incident, including the situation regarding Hong Kong children residing in the Mainland coming to Hong Kong to seek medical services, and to put in place effective response measures at schools, border control points and private medical service organisations, etc.

5. The Expert Group has also formed three Sub-groups to look into different issues. They are the Health Services Sub-group, the Treatment Sub-group and the Food Safety, Supply and Control Sub-group. The Expert Group met twice on 26 September and 20 October 2008 and each Sub-group met once to study and follow up on matters under their purview.

6. The Health Services Sub-group is to study and assess the demand for health services of local children who have allegedly consumed dairy products tainted with melamine, to ensure that the manpower and related supporting facilities of the public healthcare system can provide appropriate medical assessment and treatment for affected children, and to conduct regular review of the situation and service demand.

7. The Treatment Sub-group is tasked to formulate effective procedures and methods for medical assessment and treatment, to propose follow-up measures on medical and health services, to make reference to the treatment experience in the Mainland and overseas, and to conduct medical research on local cases.

8. The Food Safety, Supply and Control Sub-group is to work out the strategy for effective monitoring and inspection of dairy products and food contaminated by melamine, to study the problem of the contamination of food supply by melamine in Hong Kong, and to conduct risk assessment in regard to the impact of the incident on general food safety.

Other measures

9. From 28 September to 30 September, arrangements were made by the Ministry of Health for representatives of the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and experts of the Hospital Authority (HA) to visit Beijing and Shijiazhuang in Hebei to study the cases with renal problems suspected to be related to the consumption of tainted dairy products. The departments concerned and the HA have also maintained close liaison with the healthcare and medical sector and the overseas and Mainland authorities to ensure that the latest information can be obtained.

10. In addition to providing support to the Expert Group, various departments and the HA have taken prompt actions to address public demands. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has stepped up its tests on milk powder, dairy products and other food items with daily release of the latest information on the test results and the recall of food in question. A telephone enquiry hotline has been set up by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) under the Department of Health (DH) to answer public enquiries on the melamine incident and disseminate health advice to the public. On health services, the HA has arranged for the provision of free assessment to eligible children at its Designated Clinics and Special Assessment Centres. Details are as follows.

Telephone Enquiry Hotline

11. The Administration understands the public's concerns over the incident, and the CHP of the DH has therefore put in place a telephone enquiry hotline since 21 September to provide enquiry service for those who suspect themselves or their children of having consumed tainted milk powder or dairy products. As at 1 November, the hotline has received a total of 10,254 telephone enquiries. Recently, the number of enquiries received by the CHP hotline has dropped substantially. From 27 October to 1 November, the CHP handled about 30 enquiries a day on average.

Designated Clinics (DCs) and Special Assessment Centres (SACs)

12. Since 23 September, the HA has set up 18 DCs and 7 SACs. The latter have been increased to a total of 9 between 26 September and 22 October. At present, the HA has maintained the operation of 8 SACs to provide free assessment for eligible children aged 12 or below, especially those who have consumed the milk products in question and have relevant symptoms. As at 1 November, the DCs and SACs have provided assessments and follow-up treatments to 47,499 and 16,818 children respectively. The DCs and SACs will be in operation for at least six months until March 2009 in the light of actual needs so as to ensure that the service demands are well met.

Cases reported

13. As at 1 November 2008, the CHP of the DH has been notified of a total of 10 cases of children suffering from renal problems after consuming melamine contaminated milk products (MTMP). Two of these cases were reported by private hospitals and eight by the HA. The HA has provided treatment for the children in question and will follow up on them in the medium to long term. The Administration will ensure that the manpower and related supporting facilities of the public healthcare system can provide appropriate medical assessment and

treatment for the affected children, and conduct regular review of the situation and service demand.

Clinical management

14. Given the novel nature of the MTMP disorders and the lack of any human literature (and scant animal studies), there is as yet no widely accepted consensus on clinical epidemiologic features, screening, diagnosis and management. For this reason, the delegation sent to the Mainland from 28 to 30 September 2008 gathered information and exchanged experience on the screening and clinical management of children affected by MTMP. The Expert Group has also worked with our local experts and researched literatures published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and others overseas institutions.

15. At this stage, according to the information and experience in the Mainland, all of the affected children consumed a large quantity of milk powder contaminated by melamine. Babies and young children are the most vulnerable groups because milk powder is their main food and 99% of the victims in the Mainland are children below 3 years old. Since adults consume different kinds of food, the intake of melamine per kilogram of body weight in adults is much lower than that in babies and young children, and the health risks are relatively lower in the case of adults. It is therefore not necessary to provide special assessment service for adults at present.

Regulatory standards of melamine in food

16. To safeguard public health on learning about the incident, the FHB and CFS have stepped up their tests on milk powder and dairy products and expeditiously studied the international practice to set a standard which is applicable to local circumstances and amended the Harmful Substances in Food Regulation (Cap 132AF) to set the legal limit of melamine at -

- 1 mg/kg for milk, any food intended to be consumed principally by children under the age of 36 months and any food intended to be consumed principally by pregnant or lactating women; and
- 2.5 mg/kg for other food.

17. The Harmful Substances in Food (Amendment) Regulation 2008 was gazetted on 23 September and took effect on the same day of its gazettal. It was later tabled at the Legislative Council on 8 October 2008. The aforesaid standards were set with reference to the tolerable daily intake set by the US Food and Drug Administration and are in line with the standards set by most of

the places (such as New Zealand and Canada) which have subsequently laid down standards on the concentration limit of melamine in food.

Dissemination of health information to the public

18. To address public concerns arising from the incident, the Administration understands that it is highly important to make timely and clear announcements to the public on CFS food testing results, updated situation of HA's screening services for eligible children, the number of phone enquiries received by the CHP and the number of cases involved. Such information is now released daily by the HA, CFS and CHP and these arrangements will be subject to review as appropriate.

19. To provide the public, particularly parents, with more relevant health information, we have arranged clinical experts to explain to the public through radio and other media the potential health effects of melamine tainted milk and dairy products. The HA organised two public health talks on 4 and 5 October. The HA also distributes a note to all the parents who bring their children to the 18 DCs for assessment on the screening procedures which the children will undergo so as to ease their anxieties. Through the Education Bureau, the FHB has also distributed a pamphlet to schools and parents on the toxicity of melamine and health effects. Further health information related to the melamine incident is available from the websites of the HA, CHP and CFS.

Report of the Expert Group

20. The Expert Group mentioned in paragraph 3 above submitted a Report to the Chief Secretary for Administration on 20 October (see LC Paper No. CB(2) 101/08-09(01)). A copy of the Report was also sent to Members of the Legislative Council on the same day. The Report carried both recognition and recommendations regarding the Administration's efforts in handling the melamine incident. The recommendations on health services include:

- The CHP telephone hotline should continue to operate during office hours on weekdays and Saturday mornings;
- The CHP's notification arrangement and daily public announcement of case report should continue;
- At present, the DCs and SACs are providing services in their regular operating hours on weekdays and Saturday mornings. The demand for services will be closely monitored and the operating hours of the DCs and SACs adjusted when necessary. Public announcement of attendances will continue to be made on a daily basis;

- A set of more specific case definitions in three categories, namely “suspected case, probable case and confirmed case”, is to be adopted. The CHP will communicate with the Ministry of Health and the WHO to relay Hong Kong’s set of case definitions and disseminate the same to local health professionals. The proposed set of definitions will be revisited from time to time as and when new information becomes available taking reference from scientific consensus internationally;
- The present reporting criteria used by the CHP should continue to be used, i.e. “any child presenting with renal diseases including calculi and with history of exposure to melamine containing dairy product”;
- The HA will communicate with private sector clinicians regarding the HA’s current screening, diagnosis and treatment principles which have been promulgated within the HA so as to provide them with such information for reference;
- The HA will systematically analyse the data collected at DCs and SACs;
- The FHB will consider commissioning research to assess the potential medium to long term health effects associated with melamine exposure.

Way forward

21. The Expert Group is grateful to the experts, academics and representatives of government departments who serve on the Expert Group. While the Expert Group will monitor the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations, the three Sub-groups under the Expert Group have worked again to take forward the recommendations set out above to ensure that the tasks are promptly and effectively discharged.

22. On medical and health services, we will continue to monitor the hotline service as well as the utilisation trend of the HA’s DCs and SACs and collate information for the Health Services Sub-group on a regular basis. The provision of health services will also be reviewed and adjusted in the light of the latest development and the public demands to ensure effective use of resources.

23. The FHB plans to coordinate through the Treatment Sub-group research projects to assess the potential medium to long term health effects associated with melamine exposure. These research projects should be conducted in the form of multi-partite collaboration between the DH, HA and universities. Research projects being planned include cohort study of affected children, laboratory studies and animal model research.

24. On food safety, supply and control, the FHB and CFS will continue with their surveillance and food sampling, and take forward the testing scheme and proposed legislative measures.

25. The three Sub-groups will proceed with the work under their purview. The Expert Group will further report progress in three months' time. We will remain vigilant on any new development and address with top priority public concerns on the issue. The Expert Group will keep the Chief Secretary for Administration apprised of its work.

Food and Health Bureau
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