

For Discussion
on 11 June 1999

LegCo Panel on Health Services

Suspected Dioxin Contamination of European food Products

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the events leading to the recent dioxin food issue and the follow-up actions taken by the Department of Health.

Developments and Actions

2. The current dioxin food crisis first caught the attention of Department of Health on 31 May 1999. There was an agency report quoting that dioxin was the cause of the rising death rate of poultry in a certain number of Belgian farms.
3. Dioxin comprises a group of environmental pollutants which can arise either naturally e.g. after volcano eruptions, or as undesirable side-products from industrial activities e.g. manufacturing of pesticides. They are known cancer-causing agents.
4. In finding out whether the batch of contaminated poultry had been imported into Hong Kong, the Department of Health noted that there had not been any import of Belgian poultry since 1998. In the same period, only four kilograms of eggs had been imported from Belgium.
5. The Department of Health then made further researches and enquiries, and managed to track down by 3 June 1999 that not only far more Belgian poultry farms were involved, the contamination had somehow affected neighbouring countries like Holland, France and Germany. Moreover, Belgium had started to remove poultry, eggs and related food products from its market. A number of other European countries had also adopted similar measures because of uncertainties of the extent of involvement.

6. In view of the importance of public health protection and the lack of confirmation on the safety of incriminated products from the four countries, Department of Health announced on the evening of 3 June 1999 that the four lines of products (ie. poultry, eggs and their products) from the four countries should be withheld from sale. The impact was assessed to be minimal for poultry, as Holland had only 5% of the frozen and chilled poultry market share, and those of the other three countries were insignificant. As for eggs, Holland and Germany together accounted for 1/3 of the market share. But, in order to safeguard public health and with confidence that the free market could usually adjust quickly, the decision was made.

7. Following on, as events unfolded in Europe, pork and their products were also assessed to be affected. Thus, on the next day, these were also put under the local withhold list. Holland had about 15% of the frozen and chilled pork market share whilst the other three together occupied about 5%. The assessment was that a temporary reduction in the supply of pork should not pose a major problem. In addition to the above, investigation on possible involvement of beef and their products as cited by some agencies and local media reports was also carried out.

8. Difficulties in following through continued to be encountered because of the scarcity of official information. It was only in the late afternoon of 7 June 1999 when Department of Health was able to confirm that beef and dairy products also came under Europe's withhold exercise. Although these countries only had a 2% share of the frozen and chilled beef market here, they constituted 25% to 33% of the infant formula market. Mindful that this might have implications on young children, best possible networking was established with various major stakeholders, including the Hospital Authority, private hospitals, family physicians, paediatricians, obstetricians, gynaecologists, midwives and their respective societies, the Education Department and the Social Welfare Department, to help them understand the rationale behind the decision and solicit their support for providing advice to families. At the same time, infant formula importers with unaffected products were contacted to secure additional supplies.

9. In parallel, the Department of Health has collected samples of the affected products for testing. Because of the complexities involved, the testing

would take about four weeks to complete.

Progress of the Withhold Exercise

10. The progress of the withhold exercise is satisfactory. As at 9 June 1999, the suspension of sale of poultry, eggs, pork and their products from the four European countries has been completed. As for beef and dairy products from these countries, more than 85% have been withheld from sale.

11. On the whole, the community has been supportive of the decision to withhold the affected products from sale. Initially, there were problems in providing advice to the health and child care professionals. This was because the announcement on the withhold from sale of beef and dairy products was made in the late evening of 7 June 1999 and the relevant information might not have reached relevant parties when business resumed in the morning of 8 June 1999. The Department of Health has now taken further necessary steps to expand the communication network by setting up additional hotlines and using the Internet.

Reactions of European Union (EU) and Other Countries

12. In general, individual countries in the EU vary in their management of this incident. The spectrum of responses is diversified. Some just ban all Belgian foods whilst others would withhold sale of produce from Holland, France and Germany as well.

13. Over in North America, the United States and Canada have taken the issue very seriously and have ordered withholding from sale of all poultry, eggs, pork, beef and related products of European origin.

14. Here in Asia, Singapore and South Korea essentially follow the North American steps.

Way Forward

15. There will likely be many more developments in this incident as the

investigation goes on in Europe. The Department of Health will closely monitor the issue and come up with the necessary measures to tackle new problems which may emerge. In deciding when to resume sale of the suspended products, the following factors will be considered:-

- (a) detailed and specific documentary proof from the four European countries on the safety of their products already in Hong Kong and those to be imported into Hong Kong; and
- (b) EU's general decision or position regarding this dioxin issue and the safety of food products in the four European countries in question.

Health and Welfare Bureau
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