

For information  
on 19 July 1999

**LegCo Panel on Health Services**

**GOVERNMENT'S MONITORING AND TESTING  
OF VARIOUS TYPES OF FOODS**

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper briefs Members on HKSARG's food safety control system, with particular emphasis on fish and soft shell turtle.

**BACKGROUND**

2. Earlier this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued an article entitled "Policy and Practice: Food Safety in the 21st Century", which alerted the international community to the global importance of food safety. Epidemiological surveillance has demonstrated a constant universal increase in the prevalence of foodborne illnesses in both developed and developing countries. Some global changes, already in progress, are likely to have significant adverse effects. Urbanization, alterations in microbial and other ecological systems and diminishing supplies of food and fresh water are among the factors in question. The degradation of the immediate human living environment also poses a serious challenge. Hong Kong is not immune to this world trend.

## **PREVENTION AND CONTROL**

3. Since our food mostly begin as agricultural or aquatic products, safety assurance should, quite rightly, start from their origin, that is, the farm or the sea. Transformed into organizational set-up, this would mean that the input of different sectors and disciplines would be essential if satisfactory food safety is to be achieved. WHO refers the grouping of stakeholders here as a tripartite situation - the trade, the consumers and the regulatory agency. Food safety can only be attained by close collaboration among these three sectors. Monitoring and timely control of food safety hazards are the way to monitoring safety. The aims are to prevent the entry of contaminants into the food chain, to prevent their proliferation and to inactivate them where necessary.

- *Promotion By Health Education and Legislation*

4. The trade is primarily entrusted with the responsibility to see that the food they sell for human consumption is safe. Likewise, the consumers should be educated to enable them to make informed choices. Legislation is also required. The licensing of food factories and premises to ensure a level of environmental hygiene conducive to the production and sale of safe food is of fundamental importance. Legal requirements have also been set for the safety standard requirements of high risk food items like game, meat, poultry, milk and milk products and frozen confections. Exporting countries or places of the high risk food must satisfy the Director of Health of the safety of their produce before such are allowed to enter HKSAR on trial basis. Each consignment has to be accompanied by health certificates which will be examined, and the goods are subject to inspection and sample testing at import,

wholesale and retail levels.

5. But, legislation on its own cannot yield all the desired results, Increasingly, reliance is being placed on the contribution of the food trade and the consumers. They should be educated in what has to be done as partners to achieve food safety. The information technology and communication media revolutions can be expected to increase the coverage achieved in this field. Health education in relation to food safety would be one of the principal tasks of the primary health care network.

- *Surveillance*

6. On the regulatory side, Department of Health (DH) has set up various food safety related surveillance systems to monitor foodborne diseases and different categories of food contamination. Control points are set up at various entry points for inspection of imported food. Samples are taken at import, wholesale and retail levels for chemical, microbiological and radioactivity analysis to ascertain their fitness for human consumption. Prepackaged food is also being checked for compliance with food labelling laws.

## **SPECIFIC CONCERNS**

### **Fish**

7. The food safety risk of marine fish mainly relates to the presence of ciguatoxin in some coral reef fish. The accumulation of such toxin in coral reef fish is a natural phenomenon in the food chain. The food safety risk

increases with the size of the fish because of the toxin load. Health education by the Agriculture and Fisheries Department (AFD) and Department of Health to both the traders and the consumers about this inherent hazard remains the mainstay of the local eiguatera food poisoning prevention strategy. The objective is to facilitate the making of informed choices. This is also in line with WHO's recommendation for tackling this problem.

8. A distribution tracing and testing surveillance system jointly administered by AFD and DH has been added on to deal with this problem, in the light of the local preponderance of coral reef fish. Under the testing surveillance, coral reef fish from new fishing grounds will first be submitted by potential importers for sample testing of ciguatoxin. Although negative results cannot give risk-proof assurance, positive results will speak strongly against further import from such places for some time.

9. On the other hand, parasites pose the greatest risk for food safety in fresh water fish. They naturally infest many such fish and can affect human if the latter has the habit of eating undercooked or raw fish. The infestation can be completely avoided by adequate cooking or by freezing if the fish is to be consumed raw.

### **Soft Shell Turtle**

10. Soft shell turtle is a game by definition. The import of this food is subject to the safety control stipulated in the Imported Game, Meat and Poultry Regulations. Exporting countries will have to satisfy the Director of Health of the safety of their relevant commodities before such are allowed to

enter Hong Kong. Each consignment must be accompanied by a health certificate, stating that the food is free from infectious disease hazardous to human health and is fit for human consumption. The food will be inspected and sample tested at the import, wholesale and retail levels. There have not been any records of unsatisfactory findings in the past three years in our microbiological surveillance done on soft shell turtles.

11. The Agriculture and Fisheries Department regularly inspects the hygiene conditions of stalls licensed to sell live soft shell turtles. So far, there has not been any breach in hygiene and licence conditions.

### **Food Crises**

12. In the event of food crises, relevant bureaux, departments and statutory bodies will collaborate and coordinate for management. The leading agency responsible will depend on the exact nature of the problem in question. With the accumulation of experience through the years, the mechanism has become more mature.

13. In dealing with food crises or food safety issues in general, we have, like the vast majority of food safety control authorities, drawn reference from a number of international and reputable organizations, such as the World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the Codex Alimentarius Commission, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the United States. Incidentally, food safety control in the United States is not the exclusive responsibility of the FDA. There are 11 other federal agencies involved with food safety matters in the United States.

Department of Health

July 1999