

The Importance of Veterinary Public Health

Purpose

This paper serves to provide members with background information concerning the emergence of significant public health and food safety issues, the intimate involvement of the veterinary profession in these issues and the necessity of including veterinary input at the policy level in the new food safety agency.

Our Proposal

1. All disciplines involved in food safety are integrated into a single food safety agency.
2. There is far greater veterinary involvement across all aspects of food safety and public health.
3. There is representation of the veterinary profession at the policy level by the creation of a Chief Veterinary Officer supported by additional veterinary specialists and risk managers at the appropriate level.

Why the Current Proposed Structure is Inadequate

Under the current proposed structure, veterinary input is restricted to the technical level. The lack of veterinary contribution at a policy level will result in gaps in the knowledge base available to the risk managers and decision makers, which will inevitably lead to suboptimal decisions being made. Furthermore, the lack of a clearly defined veterinary public health (VPH) infrastructure will lead to failures to plan and coordinate VPH activities. Clearly, if the administration is seriously trying to address food safety and public health concerns, then the issue of veterinary input at a policy level must have a higher priority.

Current Public Health Concerns

Emerging and re-emerging diseases including foodborne illnesses are now a significant public health concern. According to the United Nation's World Health Organisation (WHO), about 75 percent of the new diseases that have affected humans in the past 10 years are caused by pathogens of animal origin. This has resulted in a global increased awareness of the close interdependence between animal health and human health.

These include not only new diseases such as Mad Cow Disease, Nipah virus in pigs in Malaysia, SARS in wildlife, HIV and avian influenza but re-emerging diseases such as West Nile virus, Japanese encephalitis, and tuberculosis as well as foodborne diseases such as *Streptococcus suis*, Salmonellosis, Campylobacteriosis and *E. coli* O157. Furthermore, other food related issues, such as resistance to antimicrobials, have also become an issue of increasing concern for animal production and human health.

Common to these emerging problems have been new trends in animal production practices, increased centralised processing of animal products, globalisation of the food industry, changing patterns of wildlife populations and their disease vectors and demographic changes in the human population.

Relevance of Veterinary Input

Veterinarians, due to their ability to link the health of the animal and human populations, are in an ideal position to address the concerns outlined above. They possess the broadest combination of knowledge and skills in the inter-disciplinary "farm to fork" public health team.

Veterinarians, because of their knowledge of animal diseases and food production, as well as their training in ecological, economic and human cultural issues, have become leaders in developing and implementing new methods of promoting sustainable public health which are ecosystemically-grounded, culturally feasible,

and economically realistic. In fact the term 'herd health' is a metaphor for 'community health'.

Veterinarians are involved in all aspects of food safety and public health activities, e.g. monitoring of livestock farms and animal marketing, control of slaughter and processing of animal products, importation and quarantine of animals and animal products, overseeing transport and distribution, risk assessment and communication, disease monitoring, (especially zoonotic diseases), vector control programmes, monitoring of wildlife diseases and urban animal control.

Veterinary input and control of major disease control programmes has resulted in the successful eradication of many zoonotic diseases e.g. bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, rabies, trichinellosis and echinococcosis in many countries. The most poignant example to Hong Kong has been the control of avian influenza. Hong Kong's envied status in the region has been a direct result of veterinary advice and policy implementation.

The Role of Veterinarians in Public Health in Other Countries

Veterinarians, both as policy makers and managers of public health programs, have been employed in government departments and public health agencies worldwide including international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). The public health and food safety structures in many countries are directed by veterinarians. Singapore's Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, which has complete responsibility for food safety and agriculture is managed by veterinarians. An organisation chart for the AVA and the French Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is attached for reference. Similar veterinary responsibility for food safety is also seen in other EU countries and also Mainland China.

What Needs to Be Addressed

We strongly urge the administration to recognise fully the necessity of direct veterinary contribution to public health policy development. The involvement of veterinary expertise at the policy level is necessary to ensure adequate planning, design, implementation and supervision of VPH programmes and to ensure appropriate integration and collaboration with human health programmes. Further veterinary involvement is also necessary across all sectors of food safety and public health.

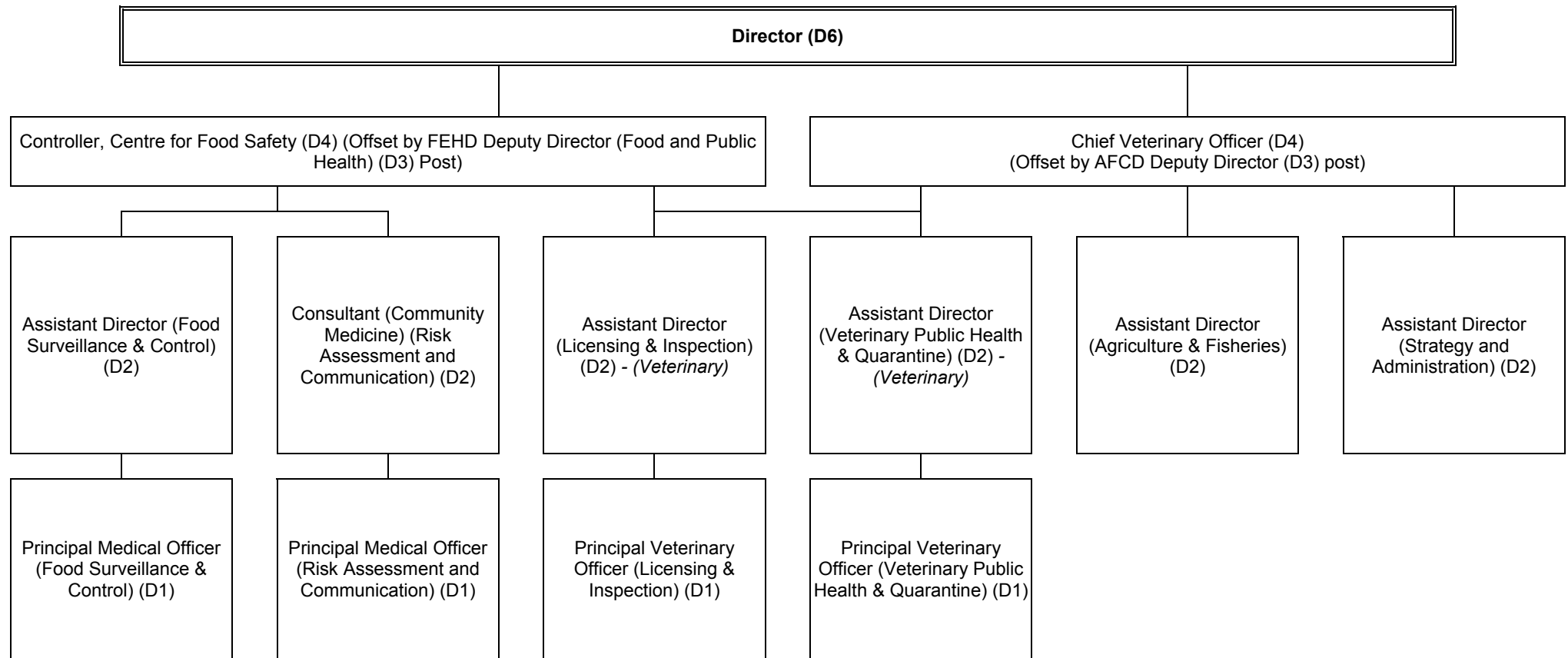
Of the 167 participating countries in the OIE, almost all are represented by a Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) with authority at policy level and responsibility for animal health, VPH policy as well as public health and food safety. The CVO is also the liaison focus on international veterinary matters.

A suggested food safety agency organisational structure is attached. It places much greater emphasis on veterinary public health contributions, under the auspices of a Chief Veterinary Officer. The proposed structure provides for a much more balanced representation and allows veterinary professional input to assume its position as a partner in a public health and food safety agency serving the people of Hong Kong.

**Veterinary Officers of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation
Department and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department**

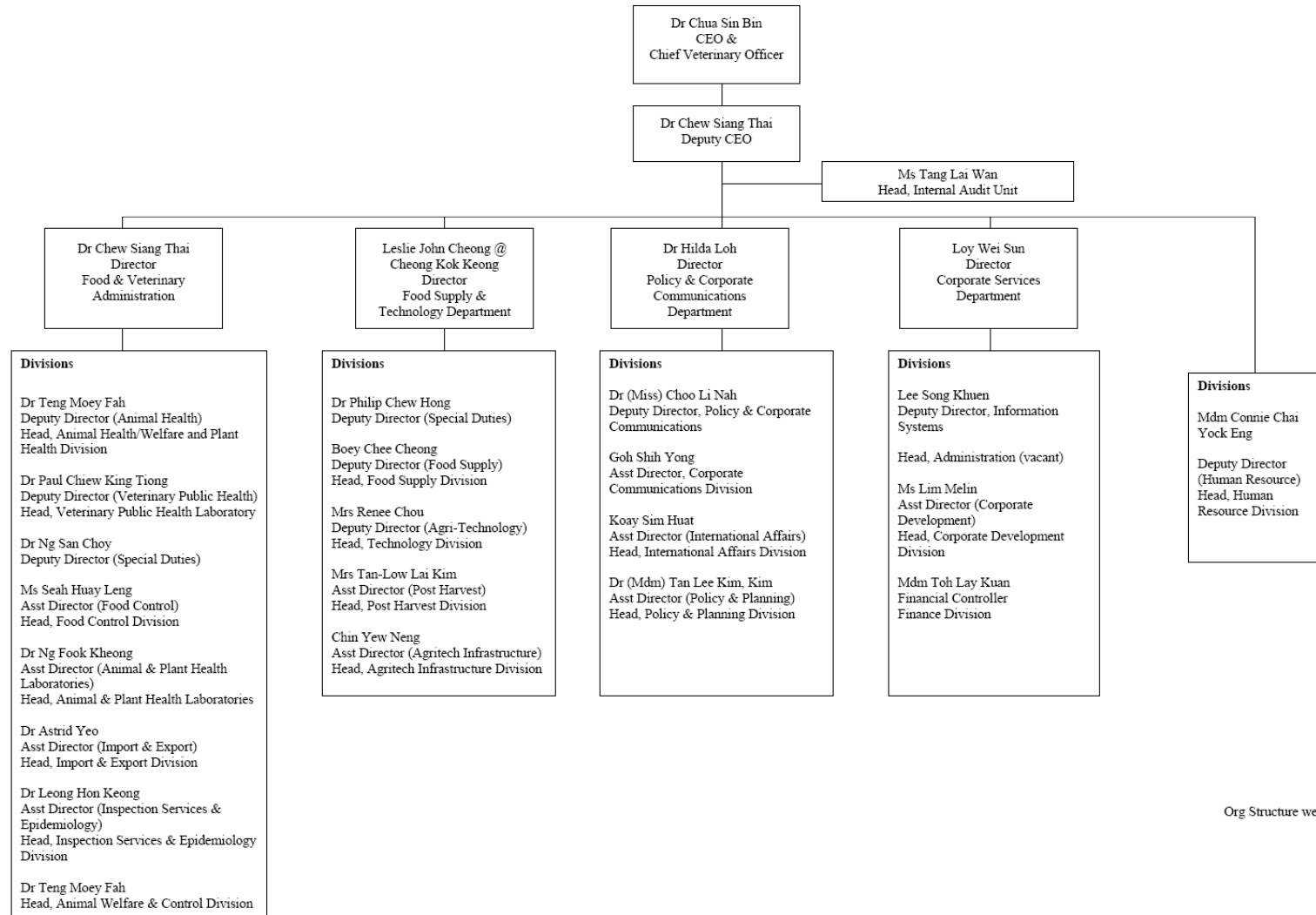
December 2005

Proposed Organisation Structure of the HKSAR Food Safety Agency



ORGANISATION CHART FOR THE AGRI-FOOD AND VETERINARY AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE

AGRI-FOOD & VETERINARY AUTHORITY



Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries of France

Director General of Food

