

(Translation)

(Letterhead of Food and Health Bureau)

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電話號碼 Tel nos. : 3509 8925
傳真號碼 Fax nos. : 2136 3282

10 March 2015

Clerk to LegCo Panel on Food Safety and
Environmental Hygiene
(Attn.: Ms Alice LEUNG)
Legislative Council Complex
1 Legislative Council Road
Central, Hong Kong
(Fax: 2509 9055)

Dear Ms Leung,

Presence of Ethanol in a Ribena Drink

Thank you for referring to us the letter dated 27 February 2015 from Hon Alice MAK Mei-kuen to the Chairman of the Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel) concerning the captioned subject. Regarding Hon MAK's concern, our reply is set out as follows.

2. Food poisoning is a statutorily notifiable infectious disease. In general, upon receipt of notification from the Hospital Authority (HA) or private medical practitioners, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) will initiate immediate epidemiological investigation to ascertain if there is any case of food poisoning and determine the food and pathogens that may be involved. Relevant departments, including the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and its Centre for Food Safety (CFS), will also be notified immediately as appropriate.

3. After receiving the information from CHP, CFS will immediately assess the situation and conduct follow-up investigation to confirm if the incident poses threat to public health. Decision for taking the most appropriate follow-up action will then be made to ensure food safety and safeguard public health in Hong Kong.

The incident

4. On 19 February 2015, CHP received notification from Tseung Kwan O Hospital (TKOH) of the aforesaid suspected food poisoning case involving a Ribena drink. Epidemiological investigation was initiated on the same day. After contacting the clinician of TKOH and the Hong Kong Poison Information Centre, CHP learnt that the two persons affected had consumed the same pack of Ribena drink. They both took a mouthful and spat out immediately as the drink smelt and tasted like alcohol. They reported progressive sore throat and burning sensation in the throat. In the early hours of 19 February, the laboratory of TKOH conducted a blood test on the two persons but no ethanol or methanol was detected. Their clinical diagnosis did not point to serious alcohol intoxication as they were in stable conditions all along. The two persons were discharged after staying in the hospital for one and two days respectively.

Laboratory test by HA

5. The two persons affected in the incident attended the Accident and Emergency Department of TKOH on the night of 18 February. After conducting the blood test in the early hours of 19 February, the hospital reached a clinical diagnosis that did not suggest serious alcohol intoxication (see paragraph 4 above). As there was no imminent clinical need, the HA Toxicology Reference Laboratory (TRL), clinical departments in TKOH and the duty doctor of DH agreed that further testing on the sample taken from the remainder of the Ribena in question be carried out on 23 February (i.e. the first working day after the public holiday). Once the preliminary test findings were available on 25 February, the HA TRL immediately notified CHP of the relevant information (see paragraph 7 below).

Follow-up work

6. CHP also informed FEHD of the case on the day it received the notification (i.e. 19 February). FEHD immediately deployed staff to the kiosk alleged to have sold the drink in question, intending to conduct investigation, but the kiosk was closed for the public holiday. FEHD sent staff to the kiosk again for investigation on 25 February but no drinks of the relevant brand were found available for sale at the kiosk.

7. On the afternoon of 25 February, CHP was informed by HA TRL of the preliminary test findings which showed that ethanol content accounted for 43.9% of the total volume in the sample taken from the remainder of the Ribena in question. Upon confirmation of the pathogen causing the food poisoning case, CHP notified CFS and the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) immediately on the same evening and issued a press release about the case.

8. No related cases were received by CHP during the period from 19 to 25 February. Based on the exceptionally high ethanol reading and the preliminary investigations conducted by HKPF so far, this case is highly likely to be an incident involving adulteration on a pre-packed drink. There were no related cases reported to CHP or CFS so far. Up to this moment, the overall picture of the incident does not suggest that it is a food safety incident involving a systemic problem.

9. CFS is assisting HKPF in their criminal investigation into this incident. Follow-up work included invoking the powers conferred by the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612) to trace the source and distribution of the affected batch of Ribena drink. After obtaining the import and distribution records of the affected batch of drink, CFS had shared the information collected with the Police. Based on the test findings and for the sake of prudence, CFS also took the initiative to contact the importer concerned who had agreed to take the affected batch of products off the shelf voluntarily as a precautionary measure. The importer confirmed that all the products of the affected batch had been taken off the shelf and would be temporarily marked and sealed. CFS had also collected a total of 18 samples from different locations at the retail level for testing and ethanol was not detected in any of those samples.

10. CFS will continue to closely monitor the situation, and take surveillance measures and enforcement actions as necessary to ensure food safety and safeguard public health in Hong Kong. In view of the public concern over the above food poisoning incident, and for the sake of prudence, relevant departments and units will examine the mechanism for handling suspected food poisoning incidents (in particular serious clinical cases) to ensure that existing mechanism is able to follow up such incidents effectively and promptly, thereby enhancing public confidence in the food safety system.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

(Jeff Leung)

for Secretary for Food and Health