

(Translation)

(Letterhead of Food and Health Bureau)

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21 August 2015

Clerk to Legislative Council
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Legislative Council Complex
1 Legislative Council Road
Central, Hong Kong
(Attn: [Miss Josephine SO])
(Fax: 2509 9055)

Dear Miss So,

Re: Sandwiches of “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen)

Thank you for referring to us the letter dated 6 August 2015 from Dr Hon Helena WONG Pik-wan to Chairman of the Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel). Regarding Dr Hon WONG’s concern over the issue relating to sandwiches of “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen), our reply is set out as follows.

Announcement and Immediate Measures

Food poisoning is a statutorily notifiable infectious disease. In general, upon receipt of notification, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health will initiate immediate epidemiological investigation to confirm the existence of a food poisoning outbreak and to determine the relevant food and pathogens that may be involved. CHP will also notify the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to conduct follow-up investigation.

Since 28 July 2015, CHP has received notifications on suspected food poisoning outbreaks in relation to consumption of “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches. A press release was issued on 31 July 2015 to announce four suspected food poisoning outbreaks associated with consumption of sandwiches. Upon receipt of the notifications, CHP has initiated immediate epidemiological investigation and contacted the affected persons to understand about their symptoms, record of medical consultation, food history, the source of purchase the affected sandwiches and the way they handled them after purchase. Investigation by CHP revealed that the patients purchased the “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches from different channels and retail outlets during the period from 24 to 29 July 2015. CHP has notified CFS of the relevant information.

According to the investigation by CFS and records of the importers, the “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches involved in the suspected food poisoning outbreaks were purchased through different channels. They came in various flavours and involved different retailers, suppliers and importers, all of them imported from Taiwan. With the information gathered during the investigation, CFS suspected that the multiple food poisoning outbreaks had arisen from food handling upstream, i.e. the food had been contaminated before importing into Hong Kong. Therefore, through the press release of CHP on 2 August 2015, CFS urged members of the public not to consume the affected products, regardless of batches and flavours. The trade should also stop using or selling the products concerned immediately. Besides, for the sake of prudence, CFS issued a press release on 3 August 2015 to ban all the “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches from being imported into and sold in Hong Kong immediately. The ban covers all batches and flavours of sandwiches of the brand wherever they are produced, to ensure food safety and public health. CFS has maintained close liaison with the relevant authorities of Taiwan and exchanged with each other the information about the incident to facilitate investigation and institution of control measures.

Since receiving notification from CHP on 31 July 2015, CFS has immediately sent staff to inspect the retail outlets (including eight retail outlets¹ and two collection points for online purchases in Mong Kok) involved in the suspected food poisoning cases. No remaining stock of the affected products has been found. CFS has also deployed staff to inspect over 300 retail outlets which may sell the affected products. No sandwiches of the relevant brand have been

¹ The eight retail outlets include city'super in Harbour City, Tsim Sha Tsui, APITA in Cityplaza, Taikoo Shing, PIAGO in Telford Plaza, Kowloon Bay, Eight Tea Eight restaurant in Yuen Long, Foodies Corner, a temporary stall in Tsuen Fung Centre and two exhibition booths in Lok Fu and Ma On Shan respectively.

found on sale. The vendors concerned have stopped import and sale of the affected products upon CFS' order.

Publicity, Education and Follow-up Investigation

In respect to this incident, CFS issued food alerts to the public and rapid alert to the trade on 2 August and 3 August 2015 respectively. Information about “microbiological risks of sandwiches” has also been uploaded onto Food Safety Topics of CFS' website to provide traders and consumers with food safety messages and advice regarding sandwiches. Besides, CFS has uploaded information about “Sandwiches are high-risk food items. Know more about the risks to avoid food poisoning” (“高危食品三文治，認識風險免中毒”) onto its Facebook Page to remind people to take heed of key aspects for food safety in the purchase and consumption of sandwiches. It also relays a message from news.gov.hk which urges people not to consume and the trade not to use and sell the products concerned.

Apart from publicity and education, our follow-up investigation is still ongoing. Source-tracing by CFS found that seven importers had imported “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches (with three of them involved in the above-mentioned food poisoning cases). Two of the seven importers were also suspected to have failed to register under the food safety legislation (with one of them involved in the above-mentioned food poisoning outbreaks). Investigation by CFS is still underway and prosecution against the unregistered importers will be considered.

Given that (1) the sandwiches were prepackaged food imported by different importers and the affected persons purchased them via different channels, (2) testing results of the stool specimens collected from the patients showed that 11 of the Group D *Salmonella* isolates were *Salmonella* Enteritidis with identical genotyping patterns, and (3) CHP's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch found Group D *Salmonella* in unconsumed sandwich samples taken from two patients and further laboratory investigation showed that all the *Salmonella* isolates were *Salmonella* Enteritidis with identical genotyping patterns, CFS is of the view that the site of contamination is likely to be the same and had occurred before entering Hong Kong. Subsequent prolonged and improper storage of the sandwiches may provide favourable conditions for the bacteria to grow and thus aggravate the level of contamination.

CFS has maintained close liaison with the relevant authorities of Taiwan and passed information about the investigation to them for follow-up investigation.

Meanwhile, CFS will continue to step up inspections to local retail outlets (including online shops), trace the source of the incriminated food and take action as appropriate, thereby safeguarding public health.

CHP noted on 5 August 2015 that the health authority of Macau is also investigating a food poisoning outbreak related to consumption of “Hung Rui Chen” (Horng Ryen Jen) sandwiches. CHP has contacted the health authority of Macau immediately and was informed that the affected sandwiches were bought from a shop within Macau.

CHP has provided epidemiological information on this food poisoning incident to the Taiwan health authority while CFS has also passed the information about its investigation to relevant authorities of Taiwan to facilitate their source-tracing. We will report to the Panel once the results of the investigation are available. In the meantime, we will review the regulatory arrangements about online purchase of food under the current food safety legislation.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

(Ricky Cheng)

for Secretary for Food and Health

c.c. Controller, Centre for Food Safety (Fax: 2536 9731)

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