

ACFEH Information Paper 1

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Disease Situation in Certain Areas of Sichuan Province

Purpose

This paper aims to brief members on the existing inspection and quarantine mechanism for imported meat as well as the follow-up actions and contingency measures taken by the authorities in Hong Kong and the Mainland to tackle the epidemic outbreak in certain areas of Sichuan province (including the cities of Ziyang (資陽市) and Neijiang (內江市)).

Monitoring System for Imported Meat

2. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has a monitoring system for imported meat. The system draws reference from international practices and standards, and is based on risk analysis assessment. All places of origin for meat (including frozen pork) must submit to FEHD relevant information which includes legislation regulating hygiene standards of meat; animal disease situation; facilities and hygiene standards of farms, slaughterhouses and processing plants; issuing authority and accreditation details of health certificates etc to certify the hygiene standard of their meat. After passing through vetting procedures, they are then permitted to supply meat to Hong Kong on a trial basis.

3. Initially, the first three batches of meat are imported on a trial basis and subject to examination of FEHD by way of detention for examination. They will only be released to the market for sale after being given a clean bill of health in inspection reports. When FEHD is satisfied with the first three batches of meat, it would conduct examination on every batch of the subsequent three batches of imported meat. When FEHD is satisfied with the results of the first six batches of meat, subsequent imports will be subject to monitoring under the regular food surveillance system and thus to random testing at import, wholesale and retail levels.

4. The above arrangement for detention and inspection as well as random testing is in line with international practices and applicable to all exporting countries and places, including the Mainland. In determining whether to suspend the import of meat from certain countries or places, the Administration will consider from the public health and food safety perspective and make reference to guidelines issued by the relevant international authorities. The Administration is entirely autonomous and makes these decisions on its own.

In respect of animal health and public health, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) has designated certain important animal diseases such as avian influenza and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (commonly known as mad cow disease) which should be reported to OIE. The OIE also issues recommendations which importing countries can follow to restrict the import of animals and animal products from countries/places affected by these diseases. *Streptococcus suis*, commonly found in pigs, is not required to be reported to the OIE. Nor has the OIE issued any guideline with regard to this disease.

Safety of Pork Imported from the Mainland

5. All pork imported from the Mainland must pass through stringent inspection and quarantine checks of the inspection and quarantine authorities and be accompanied by health certificates issued by the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) or the relevant Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau to certify that the pork is safe and fit for human consumption. The health certificate must also certify that the pigs have passed through ante-mortem inspection and have not been affected by infectious diseases.

6. As mentioned in paragraph 4 above, *Streptococcus suis* is commonly found in pigs and the presence of *Streptococcus suis* in pork does not mean that the pork is unsafe for human consumption since all pork must be thoroughly cooked before consumption. *Streptococcus Suis* therefore has no implication on food safety. Given that there is no international requirements or guidelines to restrict the import of pork due to *Streptococcus Suis*, there is no justification to ban all pork export from Sichuan Province to Hong Kong from the food safety angle. We are not aware that the international community has imposed steps to restrict the importation of pork from the Mainland.

Epidemic Situation in Certain Areas of Sichuan Province

7. Since July this year, cases of pigs and sheep dying of unexplained causes have been reported in certain areas of Sichuan Province, including the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang. According to the notification of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and AQSIQ, 469 pigs and 1 goat had died as at 25 July. Information from the Ministry of Health (MoH) showed that as at noon on 31 July, a total of 181 people had been affected, of whom 29 were laboratory confirmed cases. Among the patients, 34 people died, 31 were in serious condition and 17 had recovered and were discharged. The majority of patients had slaughtered or handled sick pigs before falling ill. People who came in close contact with the patients, including their family members, had not shown any symptoms of the disease. The affected patients had acute onset of high fever, headache and septicaemia. The more severe ones presented with septicaemic shock and meningitis.

8. The information is compatible with the clinical picture described in medical literature and indicates that the patients most probably became infected in the course of close contact with sick or dead pigs.

9. Following the epidemic outbreak, the MoA has immediately despatched a team of experts on swine diseases and veterinary epidemiology to the affected areas to diagnose and investigate the epidemic as well as to supervise epidemic prevention and control work. Having examined the diseased pigs carcasses, the expert team made the initial diagnosis of porcine streptococcus and identified the causative agent as *Streptococcus suis* II. But the factors that trigger the disease are still under investigation. To combat the epidemic, the MoA, MoH and the Sichuan authorities have adopted a raft of emergency measures, stepped up epidemic surveillance and strengthened prevention and control measures to curb the spread of the disease.

Notification Mechanism Between Hong Kong and the Mainland

10. To prevent communicable animal and plant diseases from spreading across the border and to protect the health of the public as well as animals and plants, the Administration has set up a liaison and notification mechanism with AQSIQ and MoA. Under the mechanism, the authorities across the border shall notify their counterparts in case of major animal and plant infection outbreaks.

11. Infectious disease notification between the Mainland and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) takes place at two levels. Under the Tripartite Meetings of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Expert Group on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases, the three places have established an effective mechanism for sharing experience and regular exchange of information on infectious diseases. The mechanism requires the three places to exchange information about notifiable diseases on a monthly basis, to promptly report sudden upsurge of infectious diseases of unknown nature or of public health significance and to establish point-to-point communication among the health authorities via phone and fax etc.

12. For public health matters occurring outside the Guangdong Province, the Department of Health (DH) maintains close contact and effective liaison with MoH in Beijing. The MoH and the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) also undertake regular and timely communication and discussions regarding various infectious diseases and public health incidents in Hong Kong and the Mainland. Summary of information on infectious diseases and outbreak situations in other parts of the Mainland is exchanged every month.

13. Senior health officials of the Mainland, Hong Kong and Macao also meet on a regular basis to exchange views and enhance collaboration in respect

of health policies and programmes, including prevention, surveillance and control of infectious diseases.

Follow-up Actions and Contingency Measures Taken by the Hong Kong Authorities

14. On being notified by MoH about the deaths of unexplained causes in Ziyang city, Sichuan on 22 July 2005, CHP immediately contacted MoH to enquire into the latest developments of the incident. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) and FEHD also contacted the AQSIQ and MoA to obtain details of the incident under the notification mechanism. To gain a better grasp of the situation, the Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environment Hygiene) met with AQSIQ in Beijing on 25 July 2005 to look into the latest developments of the incident.

15. Having regard to the factors mentioned above, and in the absence of scientific evidence to prove that pork from Sichuan are inherently unsafe for human consumption, we requested the AQSIQ to stop the export of frozen pork from the affected cities on 25 July 2005 in view of the public concern and the relevant Mainland authorities announced its decision to stop the export of frozen pork from Ziyang and Neijiang on the same day. In the course of the next few days, the authorities in Hong Kong had kept in close liaison with the MoH, AQSIQ and MoA on the outbreak situation. As further cases were also found in other areas of Sichuan Province, we further reflected our concerns to AQSIQ and the Mainland authorities stopped the export of frozen pork from the whole Sichuan Province on 28 July 2005. Meanwhile, we have also stopped processing applications for the import of frozen pork from the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang on 25 July 2005 and then the whole Sichuan Province on 28 July 2005. The stop in processing applications for the import of frozen pork is tantamount to an importation ban in effect.

16. In view of the epidemic in Sichuan Province, an interdepartmental task force (task force), chaired by the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, has been established to review the latest development in respect of the *Streptococcus suis* outbreak in the Sichuan Province and to map out strategies and control measures to deal with the evolving situation. Members of the task force include senior officials of HWFB, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), FEHD and DH. Particular attention will be paid to whether there would be extraordinary outbreaks or cases. The task force will adjust its strategies, as well as inspection and quarantine measures in response to the latest development in Sichuan and other provinces to protect public health in Hong Kong.

17. To understand the situation on the ground, a three-member Hong Kong expert team has been dispatched to Sichuan to obtain useful information on the epidemiology, laboratory investigation and clinical management as well as to

exchange views with attending physicians and public health officials. The team will remain in the Mainland for a few more days to further understand the epidemic situation. The expert team noted that the clinical description of the Sichuan patients were compatible with *Streptococcus suis* infection.

18. The Administration would maintain daily contact with its relevant counterparts, including MoH, AQSIQ and MoA to obtain the most up-to-date information and to better understand the latest situation in respect of the outbreak on the Mainland.

19. Further, the FEHD has stepped up liaison with AQSIQ to ensure that no diseased pigs will enter into food chain and all meat production procedures are in compliance with the health inspection and quarantine requirements. Feedback from the Mainland authority so far reveals that all the registered pig farms and pork processing plants, which supply frozen pork to Hong Kong are functioning properly and there were no outbreak of diseases. The FEHD has also strengthened inspection and quarantine work for imported live pigs and meat as well as the ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection of pigs in slaughterhouses. If there is any abnormality, FEHD will conduct further inspection and testing and will follow up the matter with the relevant Mainland authority including, where necessary, visits to the registered pig farms and meat processing plants to ensure that live pigs and frozen pork destined for Hong Kong are in compliance with the health inspection and quarantine requirements. FEHD and AFCD have also stepped up monitoring and laboratory testing on pigs found dead/deceased at slaughterhouses.

20. With regard to local farms, AFCD has alerted pig farmers to monitor their own health condition and that of their pigs. Farmers should report any outbreak of diseases or obvious increase in the mortality rate of their pigs to the AFCD. Farmers should also pay attention to their own health and cover any cut wound with bandage. Farmers who fall ill should consult a doctor as soon as possible. The doctor may then make report to the DH for follow-up as and when warranted.

21. In respect of handling of pig carcasses, farmers have been reminded to spray disinfectant powder on pig carcasses, then place them in double layer plastic bags or wrap them up with plastic sheets before sending them to Animal Carcasses Collection Points (ACCP). They should contact FEHD staff to check the collection time before sending carcasses there so as to avoid carcasses staying in ACCP for too long. AFCD has also incorporated the requirement for the proper handling of pig carcasses (including packing and disposal) in the licensing condition of pig farms. Farmers breaching the farm licence conditions may have their farm licence revoked. The FEHD has reinforced inspection work at ACCPs, arranged prompt removal of pig carcasses and stepped up enforcement against the illegal practice of improperly disposing pig carcasses.

22. FEHD has reminded its frontline staff in animal control, slaughterhouse

workers, collectors of animal carcasses and food industry workers to wear suitable protective clothing and observe personal hygiene. If they feel unwell, they should stop working immediately, report to the management and consult a doctor. The FEHD has also uploaded *Safety Tips on Handling Pork* on its website.

23. At the retail level, FEHD has stepped up inspection and enforcement against improper handling of pork and other meat. The Administration has appealed to the public not to buy pork where the source was doubtful. We have also reinforced the message that it was an offence to bring raw pork meat into Hong Kong without a valid permit. The Customs and Excise Department would step up enforcement action against illegal importation of pork.

24. The CHP has immediately notified the Hospital Authority (HA) about the situation in Sichuan Province and reminded them to report suspected cases. In turn, the HA has alerted its accident and emergency departments about the incident and issued a letter to all doctors in the territory, with an information leaflet on *Streptococcus suis* enclosed. The letter informed the doctors of the cases of deaths in Sichuan Province and asked them to look out for suspected cases and report any unusual cases. We have also implemented our usual routine border control and port health measures. To strengthen surveillance of the disease and to better understand the epidemiology of the disease in human population and the general pattern in Hong Kong, *Streptococcus suis* infection was made a statutory notifiable disease on 2 August 2005.

25. The DH now distributes information leaflets at the Hong Kong International Airport to travellers leaving for Sichuan Province and arriving in Hong Kong from Sichuan to remind them to keep good personal hygiene and not to have contact with pigs while staying in Sichuan. Meanwhile, publicity education would be stepped up at immigration checkpoints. Travellers arriving in Hong Kong from Sichuan Province are advised to seek medical consultation as soon as possible if they feel unwell and inform the doctor of their travel history. Information on the prevention of *Streptococcus suis* is also provided through DH's 24-hour hotline and website.

26. The information leaflet on *Streptococcus suis* has been uploaded on CHP's website to inform the public about the background and clinical features of the disease as well as its prevention and treatment. The Centre also advises people with suspected symptoms to consult a doctor immediately.

27. On the publicity front, TV and Radio Announcement in Public Interest are being produced to remind members of the public to take precautionary measures when handling raw pork. While there is no evidence to suggest that Hong Kong had a risk of outbreak, members of the public should stay vigilant on personal and environmental hygiene, and avoid contacting sick or dead pigs.

Follow-up Actions and Contingency Measures Taken by the Mainland Authorities

28. To curb the spread of the epidemic, the joint working group of MoA and MoH is helping the local authorities to conduct an extensive investigation and to search for suspected patients and possibly infected pigs. The local people are also urged to refrain from slaughtering or processing diseased pig carcasses. After investigation, the Mainland authorities have confirmed that pig farms for export have not been affected by the epidemic and none of their staff have come down with infection. The pork previously exported to Hong Kong and Macao have passed through stringent inspection of the inspection and quarantine authorities and certified to be safe and fit for human consumption.

29. In response to the concern of the HKSAR Government and as a precautionary measure, the Mainland authorities have suspended the export of pork from the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang with effect from 25 July 2005 and then the whole Sichuan Province on 28 July 2005. They are closely monitoring the epidemic and have stepped up disease surveillance at pig farms for export.

Conclusion

30. The Government and the authorities concerned will continue to monitor the situation closely and liaise with the Mainland authorities to keep abreast of the latest developments.

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