



中華人民共和國香港特別行政區政府總部衛生福利及食物局
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Government Secretariat, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
The People's Republic of China

本局檔號 Our Ref.:
來函檔號 Your Ref.:

電話號碼 Tel No.: 2973 8100
傳真號碼 Fax No.: 2840 0467

5 February 2004

Dr Julie Louise Gerberding
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
USA


Dear Dr Gerberding,

I refer to the Notice issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on 4 February 2004 concerning the embargo of birds from a number of Southeast Asia countries which have fallen prey to the attack of the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus. I would like to draw to your attention that inclusion of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR) under your embargo notice is not warranted given there is no outbreak of avian influenza here. In fact, the HKSAR is a separate customs territory of the People's Republic of China. Under One Country Two Systems, we maintain our own control and regulatory regime over the import and export of live animals (including birds), animal products and food items, as guaranteed under our mini constitution, the Basic Law. I would like to update you on Hong Kong's situation with a view to easing your concerns.

Hong Kong first experienced an H5N1 avian influenza outbreak in poultry in 1997 when the control strategy was complete depopulation. Since then, three other outbreaks erupted, though in a smaller scale. In each outbreak, the Hong Kong Government devised its control strategy in the light of prevailing circumstances. The measures that we had adopted included quarantine, depopulation of affected chickens and vaccination.

Learning from these outbreaks, we understand our defence line is long and vulnerable for possible viral attacks. Since 1998, we shifted our strategy from a defensive one to a more proactive approach in which we have put in place a series of preventive measures to guard against possible outbreaks targeting at the sources of the virus and potential carriers – live poultry and wild birds. These measures have been enhanced in the light of experience learnt over the years to effectively address the problem and minimise the risk of another outbreak in Hong Kong. These measures include:

- Vaccination – Following a trial scheme on farms at the vicinity of avian influenza affected farms in late 2002 and early 2003, the Government introduced the programme to cover all chicken farms last June. An agreement has also been secured last October with the Mainland to vaccinate all chickens for export to Hong Kong. From January 15, all imported and local chickens in the market have to be vaccinated to ensure their immunity status is maintained at a satisfactory level. Staff of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department will sample marketable chickens at local farms to check on their health condition before they are dispatched to the market.
- Regulation of local farms including tightened biosecurity measures – In view of possible transmission from wild birds and migratory birds, the installation of bird-proof facilities is required. To detect if local farms are infected, sentinel chickens (i.e., unvaccinated chickens) are placed in each batch of vaccinated chickens. Through monitoring the health conditions of the sentinels together with testing on antibody level of vaccinated chickens, the effectiveness of the vaccine in protecting the chickens can be constantly checked.
- Import control – All imported chickens from the Mainland must come from registered farms recognised by the Mainland authority. A health certificate must accompany each consignment of imported chickens. Other import control measures include testing of antibody level of imported chickens, dead and sick bird monitoring and random screening testing of infection as appropriate.
- Segregation policy – To prevent the mixing of different types of avian influenza viruses that may result in reassortment into deadly viruses, a segregation policy based on risk assessment has been implemented. As waterfowls are natural carriers of avian influenza viruses, all waterfowls in Hong Kong must be centrally slaughtered and no live

waterfowls are allowed to be sold in retail outlets. In addition, we require that waterfowl's offal must be separately and individually packed to prevent cross-contamination. Given the scientific research that genetic material from H9 and H6 influenza viruses commonly carried by quail mixed with that from a goose H5N1 virus to form the lethal 1997 H5N1 virus, all live quails must be segregated from live chickens from the farm to retailers. No live quails are sold in our retail outlets.

- Market rest days – At the wholesale and retail levels, we have market rest days to break the virus cycle and reduce the viral load there, if any. There are four rest days for the wholesale and two matching rest days for the retailers. Trading activities must cease on the rest days and all live poultry in the retail outlet must be slaughtered. The premises must be thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.
- Hygiene requirements on wholesale markets and retail outlets -- We have imposed stringent hygiene requirements on these premises. In addition, poultry retailers are required to surrender all live poultry for disposal on detection of even one dead bird with H5 virus isolated. The concerned outlet should then be thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.
- Surveillance – A comprehensive surveillance programme on both human and avian influenza on poultry have been put in place to monitor human influenza activity and detect the presence of all types of avian influenza viruses in the environment. This enables us to take responsive measures in a timely manner for the protection of public health. The human surveillance programme covers a network of clinics, hospitals and laboratories in the public and private sectors. The surveillance programme on poultry, started in 1998, targets at poultry at all levels from farms, imports, wholesale and retail outlets for early detection of any abnormalities so that appropriate responsive measures can be taken to arrest the situation. This programme has been extended in 2003 to cover wild birds, waterfowls in recreational parks and pet birds available for sale in the market. In collaboration with the University of Hong Kong, test had been conducted on 34,000 samples in 2003.

The measures we have adopted have been effective in averting H5 avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong despite the extensive and rapid spread of the disease in the region. In fact, since our imposition of the requirement for all chickens to be vaccinated with the H5 vaccine, we have found no evidence of H5 infection in Hong Kong at all.

Nevertheless, following Guangdong's outbreak in late January, the Government has added more than 10 preventive measures including the temporary suspension of all imports of live poultry, pet birds and poultry meat from the Mainland, stepping up health monitoring for travelers at boundary control points, closure of Mai Po marshes and walk-in aviaries in recreational parks, free vaccination for all poultry-related workers and setting up a formal liaison mechanism with the Mainland for the exchange of information on animal diseases.

I hope you would reconsider the imposition of an embargo notice on Hong Kong. Early lifting of the embargo would be much appreciated. We will be most happy to provide you with further information if necessary.

Yours sincerely,



(Dr E K Yeoh)

Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food