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**INFORMATION EXCHANGE, EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION
THE MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE
(Malaysia)**

Abstract

Information exchange, education and communication through cooperation between Food Quality Control Division, Department of Public Health, the Ministry of Health as the lead agency for food safety and with the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry and relevant other Ministries, agencies and organizations is essential for the nation. Policies and programmes on food safety are science-based, to the extent possible.

The National Food Safety Policy endorsed by the National Food Safety and Nutrition Council 2001 has identified several key elements including education on food safety and scientific information gathering and analysis which has an impact particularly contributing towards strengthening the nations' food safety programme and a society of well-informed consumers.

Current initiatives in information exchange and communication in food safety is the Food Safety Information System of Malaysia (FoSIM) that utilizes ICT, to improve food safety control measures on imported foods. Another initiative such as the Crisis Alert Team for both periods of crisis and pre-crisis is seen vital. Communication of information related to agriculture, fisheries and veterinary services, trade, education and those related to food safety is also available through the web-based portals of the relevant Ministries and public and private agencies and also through traditional media of information dissemination of brochures, pamphlets and posters.

Food safety education in Malaysia continuously receives good response through the demand for the Food Handlers Training Programme by food handlers and food industry operators. The demand for recognition under the MCS HACCP certification by the Ministry of Health and accreditation of the Veterinary Health Mark Logo by the Department of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industries is also good.

The future challenge at the national level is the implementation and practicalities of all relevant stakeholders to the National Food Safety Policy. At the regional level, Malaysia plays an active role in the ASEAN Expert Group on Food Safety and other ASEAN bodies related to food safety. At the international level, Malaysia plays an active role in Codex and other meeting related to food safety.

Introduction

Food safety in Malaysia is under the purview of the Food Quality Control Division (FQCD), Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health. Since food safety should be addressed from farm to table, other agencies such as the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry are also responsible in ensuring safe food for consumer protection. Increased cooperation with other relevant Ministries, agencies and organizations linked to public health and food safety is essential to meet the nation's requirements and needs. Significant progress in this arena has been achieved in the last decade by strengthening the education of the workforce through training and utilization, as well as upgrading information communication technology (ICT). One of the essential elements to Malaysia's food safety activities is ensuring policies and programmes, including legal requirements, are based on science, to the extent possible.

Throughout the process of developing scientifically-based policies, the relevant Ministries have aggressively sought input from the scientific community and others. The Ministries conduct inter-agency technical meetings based on scientific information that allows the agency to share information with, and gather input from stakeholders from both public and private sectors on food safety topics. Our policies and their effectiveness affect all our partners along the food safety chain.

However, establishing science-based programmes and policies is only the first step. In order for those policies to work, training provisions are recognized for a scientifically and technically trained workforce that can operate in modern food safety systems as well as existing small industries. One step Malaysia is taking in that direction is to increase our cadre of scientifically trained personnel in the field of implementing and auditing food safety systems such as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) in food industries, as well as implementing and auditing quality systems i.e. ISO/IEC 17025 in the food laboratories. Furthering this effort through an extensive training and education programme is one of our future initiatives and identified under the National Food Safety Policy.

Background

The National Food Safety Policy

The National Food Safety Policy endorsed by the National Food Safety and Nutrition Council in 2001, has identified several key elements including education on food safety and scientific information gathering and analysis. Scientific information gathering and analysis recognizes the need for identification and evaluation of potential hazards in food and animal feed. One of the many methods and indicators to identify food safety problems include data derived from monitoring carried out along the food chain, disease surveillance, research and epidemiological investigation. The data is imperative for correct analysis to facilitate study of the evolution of known hazards and the identification of new ones. All these would form the basis for control measures taken to ensure food safety based on scientific principles, recognizing the limits of science.

Malaysia recognizes reliable scientific information on food safety as one of the main pillars to ensure food safety. There is great need for strengthening the strategic plan to collect and analyze scientific information on food safety throughout the food chain. Therefore, adoption of appropriate information technology to facilitate accurate, relevant and timely information flow is one of the identified priorities. The strategic plan for scientific information gathering and analysis include monitoring and surveillance, research and scientific co-operation and networking. The monitoring and surveillance programme is needed to generate accurate data on the levels and trends in food contamination, which can be used as the

basis for the promulgation of regulations and preventive measures. It also helps to strengthen Malaysia's position in the international market by ensuring the safety of imported and exported food.

Issues and problems related to food safety is becoming increasingly complex and challenging, where science-based information particularly through research or studies will continue to be an important component for supporting the development of food safety policies. At the international level, the internalization of science particularly in the development of food standards based on accepted scientific basis has a tremendous imposition in Malaysia's food trade in the international market. One of the first steps in building scientific alliances is the establishment of clear lines of communication between interested agencies in scientific cooperation and technical assistance. This communication could be in the form of regular meetings of relevant agencies, an inventory of scientific cooperation or technical assistance needed or provided for, a list of experts and reference centers in various subject areas, compilation of reference materials and other means. The establishment and maintenance of a database would help to reduce overlap and duplication in scientific cooperation. In addition, it is also important that needs assessment be carried out to identify specific needs and to design and prioritize a coherent and integrated approach. The above approach are expected to facilitate the creation of a network of centers of excellence, enabling Malaysia to draw from the leading edge scientific expertise in all relevant disciplines at the national and international level.

Another element of the National Food Safety Policy is education on food safety that recognizes education programmes on food safety as a critical part of the strategy to prevent or reduce the incidence of food-borne diseases and furthering co-operation between the government and non-governmental organisation including the consumer's association as very important in ensuring the success of these programmes.

Through collaborations, there is substantial amplification of key health messages that can enhance the effectiveness of the campaigns for all involved. More importantly, the consumer is the one who benefits the most from the extensive reach of essential and timely messages. The co-operation in education emphasises several components such as information sharing, consistent messages from agencies to the consumers, research-based education approaches based on public perception and behaviour, targeting high-risk consumers or those more prone to food-borne illnesses, co-operation with the media in ensuring accurate information and facilitating conveyance of education messages, education and training to all relevant parties and introducing education for the young for a lasting impact.

Taking into consideration the above components, it is essential that educational programmes are supported by comprehensive food safety awareness campaign for consumers with tailored information, communication channel and approach to suit different audience especially high-risk consumers through broadcast media, in multilingual to ensure widest coverage and including, effective food safety educational materials to cater to target groups of different cultures and languages and different ways of eating and preparing foods.

Current Initiatives

Information Exchange and Communication

The Food Safety Information System of Malaysia (FoSIM)

The Food Safety Information System of Malaysia (FoSIM) launched in 2003 utilizes ICT, to improve food safety control measures on imported foods and enhance the safety of food for the consumers. This project involves, amongst others, the installation of the necessary network cables and hardware and the development of the system application based on web technology. The system when fully implemented will

link all 34 entry points in the country with the 14 food quality control laboratories, 13 state health departments and the FQCD, Ministry of Health. This system has an interface with the Customs Information System to allow communication between the two systems.

Among the important elements in this system is firstly, the future need for prior notification using the system by the importer which preferably should be 24 hours before a food consignment is brought into the country through any entry point, usually by sea or air (this precludes the importation of foods which could not be determined earlier than 24 hours, such as fishes and small quantities of food brought in by land); secondly, the registration of all importers for access to the system; thirdly, the need for food sampling by the health inspectors followed by the analytical results authorized by food analysts using the system and lastly, the on-line availability and the accessibility of all information in real-time pertaining to the importation of food, enabling immediate decisions regarding enforcement activities on any particular consignment of food.

Crisis Alert Team (CAT)

The establishment of a dynamic crisis alert team (CAT) at the FQCD, Ministry of Health has proven to be a success in particular when Malaysia was faced by the contamination of dioxin in the food chain in 1999. Effective communication and networking between the various Malaysian government departments and the affected stakeholders including the industries, importers and foreign government agencies via foreign embassies and High Commissions based in Kuala Lumpur enabled information exchange on imported food and ingredient to be scrutinized before approval.

Another concept of the CAT in practice, outside the limits of a crisis, is the establishment of a team of officers on a weekly rotational basis to monitor and scrutinize via the mass media and ICT, latest developments in the food safety arena globally and locally. The existence and functioning of such a team which operates 7 days a week enables the FQCD to function as in a pre-crisis period better equipped to face the challenges of a crisis.

Web-Based Information

Malaysia believes that communication is essential to safer foods, better health and greater security. Therefore, the Ministry of Health has made a milestone progress in establishing communication through the world-wide-web enabling consumers, including industries and governmental agencies to contact the Ministry on food safety aspects and to enable them to view and comment on the latest issues including food alerts, proposed legislations, forthcoming conferences, provide on-line registration for HACCP certification, access the FoSIM system for on-line registered parties and obtain much needed information on food safety. The Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry and other governmental departments also provides web-based gateway to information related to agriculture, fisheries and veterinary services, trade, education and others. The websites of several agencies relevant to food safety in Malaysia are available in Appendix 1.

Dissemination of Information

Dissemination of information on food safety is carried out via brochures, radio talks and commercials including talks and necessary training to educate personnel involved in enforcement activities. Contentious issues with the industries and consumer bodies are discussed and resolved through separate dialogues involving the relevant ministries and chaired by the respective Ministers. Communication is seen vital to link the industries with government requirements.

Food Safety Education

The Food Handlers Training

The Ministry of Health launched the Food Handler's Training Programme in 1996 and accredited private institutions to conduct a one-day Food Handlers Training Programme on basic aspects of food hygiene and handling. 39 accredited institutes are actively conducting food handlers training as of April 2004 and a total of 150,000 food handlers had undergone training. The Ministry of Health conducts the Food Handlers Training Programme with a comprehensive Training the Trainers Module since 1998. Identified Lead Trainers consists of officers from the Ministry of Health. The Ministry also promotes food handlers training at the state level to ensure basic education and knowledge before licensing of food premises. Inter-governmental and inter-agency support and communication is essential towards achieving a trained workforce in the food service industry.

HACCP in Industries

The Ministry of Health also promotes food safety through the certification of the Malaysian Certification Scheme for Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system (MCS HACCP) that describes procedures which apply to food premises in gaining HACCP certification. The certification process includes adequacy, compliance and any follow-up audits by appointed certified auditors. The Ministry will verify the maintenance of the certified HACCP system through surveillance audit. As of April 2004, more than 75 industries were certified under the MCS HACCP.

The Veterinary Health Mark Logo is a mark of quality and safety given to plants processing livestock products, awarded under the Veterinary Inspection and Accreditation Program of the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS), Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry. It also signifies the complete compliance by the plants to the minimum standards of hygiene and sanitation, quality assurance and food safety set by DVS, verified through the process of plant inspection, examination and auditing (adequacy, compliance, follow-up, surveillance and review audits) of the food safety quality system such as HACCP and Good Manufacturing Practices. As of December 2003, a total of 58 establishments are participating in this programme, whereas 33 establishments are being provided advisory services. Veterinary inspectors are involved in the veterinary inspection at the export-oriented poultry processing plant. The Veterinary Health Mark Logo scheme is recognized by relevant competent authorities and this enables the establishments to export their products.

Future challenges

National Level

The endorsement of the National Food Safety Policy by all relevant agencies and organizations has paved the way for a new era of strengthening existing commitment and creating new found areas in food safety for the nation. The implementation and practicalities involved to abide the policy by all relevant stakeholders in the next decade is hoped to achieve safe and quality food and build a nation based on a society of smart consumers.

Regional Level

The 3rd Meeting of the ASEAN Expert Group on Food Safety (AEGFS), held in Jakarta, Indonesia in February 2004 discussed the draft ASEAN Food Safety Improvement Plan (AFSIP) that encompasses proposed regional activities at the ASEAN level including activities on information sharing, education and training, and research and development. Emphasis was given to exchange of information on food safety

including during crisis between ASEAN Member Countries through existing national web-sites, through AEGFS focal points, and other means. Malaysia proposed the need to develop common format for compilation of data amongst ASEAN Member Countries in the form of research data, directory of experts, list of accredited laboratories, food business directory and training programs and courses. In the area of education and training, Malaysia proposed the establishment of training centers and joint training programmes taking into account the existing models and institutions, strengthening mechanism for informing ASEAN Member Countries of training opportunities and expertise in other ASEAN Member Countries, to develop an ASEAN module for training of trainers and food handlers and the development of training modules on food safety for healthcare workers with the assistance of the World Health Organization (WHO) for ASEAN Member Countries' needs. Malaysia also proposed the need to encourage publication and dissemination of research findings through ICT and journals. The decisions agreed at the meeting need to be followed through by all ASEAN Member Countries to strengthen food safety in the ASEAN region. The Meeting agreed on information sharing as one of the three priorities. The draft AFSIP has been endorsed by the Preparatory Senior Officials Meeting for the 7th ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM), Penang, Malaysia, 19-20 April 2004.

International Level

Malaysia recognizes the need to exchange views at meetings and therefore, is committed to actively participate at the international fora in food safety and food trade. Malaysia has and will continue to participate at food standard-setting meetings such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission and their various committees and working group to exchange views and data to facilitate trade and also to enable better understanding and harmonization of food laws. Issues discussed in other fora, such as the Committees for Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT) under the World Trade Organization are also followed closely, as Malaysia's role as a trading partner with developed countries warrants the need for fair trade practices.

Appendix 1

1. Food Quality Control Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia
<http://www.moh.gov.my/fqc/index/htm>
2. Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia
<http://webjka.dph.gov.my>
3. Ministry of Health Malaysia
<http://www.moh.gov.my>
4. Ministry of Agriculture Malaysia
<http://agrolink.moa.my>
5. Department of Agriculture Malaysia
<http://agrolink.moa.my/doa>
6. Department of Veterinary Services Malaysia
<http://agrolink.moa.my/jph>
7. Veterinary Public Health Division, Department of Veterinary Services, Malaysia
<http://agrolink.moa.my/jph/dvs/kav/English/vhmlogo.htm>
8. Department of Fisheries Malaysia
<http://agrolink.moa.my/dof>
9. Malaysian Agriculture and Research Development Institute
<http://www.mardi.my>
10. Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, Malaysia
<http://moste.gov.my>
11. Chemistry Department Malaysia
<http://www.kimia.gov.my>
11. Malaysia Institute for Nuclear Technology Research (MINT)
<http://www.moste.gov.my/kstas/s&t/mint.htm>
12. Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM)
<http://www.fmm.org.my>
13. Small and Medium Industries Development Cooperation (SMIDEC)
<http://smidec.gov.my>
14. Department of Islamic Development Malaysia / Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia
<http://web.islam.gov.my/jakim/english/> or <http://www.islam.gov.my>
15. Faculty of Food Science and Biotechnology, University Putra Malaysia
<http://www.fsb.upm.edu.my>

16. Faculty of Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
<http://pkukmweb.ukm.my/~fst/fsteng.htm>
17. Ministry of Primary Industries Malaysia
<http://www.kpu.gov.my/>
<http://mcs1.mampu.gov.my/english/fedgovt/primary.html>
18. Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB)
<http://mpob.gov.my/mpobeng.html>
19. Malaysian Cocoa Board
<http://koko.gov.my/>
20. Malaysian Pineapple Industry Board
<http://mpib.gov.my/>
21. Ministry of International Trade and Industry Malaysia
<http://www.miti.gov.my/>
22. Malaysian External Trade Development Cooperation
<http://matrade.gov.my/>
23. SIRIM Berhad
(Formerly known as Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia)
<http://www.sirim.my/>
24. Malaysian Science and Technology Information Center
<http://mastic.gov.my/>
25. Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association
<http://www.fomca.org.my/>