

**International Symposium on Safety and Uses of Food Additives**

**16 March 2014**

**Regal Airport Hotel Hong Kong**

***Food Additives from the Consumers' Perspective***

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# You are what you eat

- Consumers want to be clear in their mind what they are eating
- At best - reasonably familiar; at worst - a complete mystery
- The more information, the better about what we are eating

# HKCC's tests on food additives

- HKCC, an independent statutory organization set up by the Government of Hong Kong to protect and promote consumer interests
- Empowered by the Consumer Council Ordinance to conduct test on products and service
- Publish test results for the information of the public

# HKCC's tests on food additives

- Test of 50 dried fruits
- All samples contain at least one type of preservatives like sulphur dioxide, sorbic acid or benzoic acid with varied concentrations
- Sulphur dioxide in dried mango, from 33 ppm to 712ppm (20 times)
- But food additives were not fully disclosed on product labels
- Results: Consumer may ingest a mix of food additives which they are not aware of

# HKCC's test on food additives

- Test of 23 vegetarian food
- All samples contained one to three kinds of coloring matters
- Over 70% with one to two preservatives including coloring matters tartrazine
- Tartrazine can cause allergic reactions like asthma in certain individuals
- Grave concern to consumer who are habitual vegetarian

# UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP)

- UNGCP, first established in 1985, forms the basis of consumer protection legislation in many countries around the world
- Assisting government to develop or maintain a strong consumer protection policy which recognizes legitimate needs such as:
- The protection of consumer from hazards to their health and safety;
- The promotion and protection of the economic interests of consumer and
- Access to adequate information to enable consumers to make informed choice

# Fear always springs from ignorance

*The needs to address ignorance on what we are eating, particularly in regard to food additives is just as important from the government and business perspective, as it is from the consumer perspective.*

# Food Safety Covered by UNGCP

- Governments are encouraged to :
- Adopt legal systems, safety regulations, national or international standards to ensure that products are safe for either intended or normally foreseeable use;
- Ensure that manufacturers, distributors adhere to established laws and mandatory standards and that consumer organizations are encouraged to monitor adverse practices, such as the adulteration of foods, false or misleading claims in market and service frauds;



# Food Safety Covered by UNGCP

Cont'd

Ensure that consumer education and information programmes cover health, nutrition, food adulteration, product hazards and product labelling;

Support or adopt standards from the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization Codex Alimentarius with effective monitoring, inspection and evaluation mechanisms.

# Food Additives, a necessary evil?

- Food additive:
- any substance consumed as a food in itself and not normally used as a characteristic ingredients of food whether or not it has nutritive value;
- Any substance intentionally added to foodstuffs to perform certain technological functions, e.g. to colour, to sweeten or to preserve

# Food Additives, a necessary evil?

- Significant controversy associated with the risks and benefits of using food additives;
- Linked with cancer, digestive problems, neurological condition heart disease of obesity
- On the other hand, food additives preserve nutrient value by providing vitamins, minerals and other nutrients to food
- Preservatives reduce spoilage from sources such as air, bacteria, fungi and yeast

# Food Additives, a necessary evil?

- A frequent saying : Customer is always right.
- But some in business sees the demands for consumer information as an unnecessary intrusion or a cost burden in the production process;
- The perceived conflict between consumers and business is actually misplaced.

# Food Additives, a necessary evil?

- Consumers on the whole accept the need for food additives in many circumstances, for example;
- Preserving the nutrient value;
- Maintaining the wholesomeness of the food.
- ***As such consumer accept food additive as a must in food production process or, to put in colloquially, a “NECESSARY EVIL”***

# Consumer Representation in Decision Making

- Consumer International (CI), global voice for consumers
- The only independent federation of over 220 consumer bodies from 115 countries
- Vision of CI - a world where people can make informed choices of safe and sustainable goods and services
- Individual and collective consumer rights are secure and respected
- CI vision complements that of the UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection

# Consumer Representation in Decision Making

- Over the years, CI attempts to:
- Get the consumer voice heard
- Improve food safety and quality
- Ensure that the best available scientific evidence is the basis for food safety standards
- However CI observes that at international meetings the pressure to elaborate standards to minimize trade barrier, rather than to maximize consumer protection has been overwhelming

# Current Consumer Issue

- For example : Adoption of the standard for residues of the controversial growth promoter, ractopamine
- Ractopamine, used in US and more than two dozen other countries, is illegal for safety reasons in the EU and China
- The drug may cause heart palpitations and other adverse effects in susceptible individuals
- CI observed that the test data on which the new Codex standards is based did not adequately assess possible effects of residues on people with heart problem



# Current Consumer Issue

- EU and China will not allow imports of meat from treated livestock as compared with US and 27 other countries which allow use of the growth promoting drug
- With the adoption of relevant Codex standard, there will be possibility that exporting countries may file a trade challenge against EU and China at WTO that their restriction on ractopamine-treated pork and beef are illegal under trade agreements.

# Current Consumer Issue

- Most of the world's consumers of pork live in China and the EU.
- Ignoring the wishes of the vast majority of the world's pork consumers and the wishes of more than half the world's population.
- UN Guidelines outlines a basic obligation that governments should encourage the development of consumer education with the aim of enabling people to act as discriminating consumer, capable of making informed choices.
- Governments should therefore provide consumers with the means to have an effective voice in promoting their rights

# Capacity Building and International Participation of Consumer Organizations

- A two-fold approach promoted by CI:
- Firstly, building the capacity of consumer organizations in developing countries and countries in transition is needed, to ensure their participation in national, regional and international negotiations
- Secondly, improving consumer participation lies within Codex itself, for example through producing a check list with which it can track the progress of consumer participation in Codex, and inviting consumer organization to Codex training and related workshops

# Conclusion

- Obligation to ensure that ignorance does not damage the good work we are trying to achieve, i.e.
- Experts are not ignorant of the concerns and needs of consumer and
- Consumers are not led by ignorance and unchecked emotion.

*Thank You*