

LCQ10:Safety of paper napkins in HK

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Following is the question by the Hon Li Kwok-ying and a written reply by the Secretary for Economic Development and Labour, Mr Stephen Ip, in the Legislative Council today (March 29):

Question

It has been reported that fluorescer was detected in the paper napkins provided by some of the chain eateries in Taiwan last year, and the recently released findings of the quality supervision sample tests on paper tissues in the first quarter of 2006 in Guangdong Province have shown that 30% of the samples tested contained bacteria contents exceeding the prescribed standards. On the other hand, as recycled paper is made from the recycling of waste paper in assorted colours, bleaching treatment with fluorescent bleaches is therefore required. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether it has conducted regular sample tests on the contents of fluorescer and bacteria for various kinds of paper tissue products on the local market; if it has, of the test results and whether the scope of the sample tests covers napkins made of recycled paper, paper tissue products sold at major supermarkets, and paper tissues given away by restaurants and newspaper stands for free; if it has not, whether it will consider conducting regular sample tests annually;

(b) as it has been reported that European and American countries have imposed restrictions on the contents of fluorescent bleaches in paper products that may come into contact with food, and Taiwan has even stipulated that transferable fluorescent substances are forbidden in paper products such as paper napkins, sanitary napkins and diapers, whether the authorities have reviewed the lack of legislation for monitoring the use of fluorescent bleaches in Hong Kong; if so, of the details and results of the review; if not, the reasons for that; and

(c) whether it has studied the impact of fluorescer on human health, and the measures to enhance public awareness of such substances?

Reply

Madam President,

(a) In 2004 and 2005, the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) collected samples of 20 and 25 brands of tissue paper respectively for testing by the Government Laboratory (GL), to ascertain whether they complied with the "general safety requirement" under the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO). In the first quarter of this year, another 32 brands of tissue paper were sent to GL for testing.

The samples tested in 2004 and 2005 were collected from supermarkets and household article shops, whereas the samples collected in 2006 also included tissue paper given away by newspaper vendors. The samples did not cover paper tissues and napkins provided by restaurants, but we consider it likely that restaurants source these products from local suppliers.

All the samples were tested for total bacterial counts under the National Standard of the People's Republic of China GB15979-2000 – "Hygienic Standard of Disposable Sanitary Products". All the 2004 and 2005 samples passed the tests, while the test result of the 2006 samples is not yet available. The samples have not been tested for fluorescent brighteners as there is no concrete evidence to show that these chemicals are hazardous to human health (see reply to Parts (b) & (c) below).

C&ED will continue to conduct regular checks on paper tissue products to ensure that they meet the requirements under the CGSO.

(b) & (c) Under the CGSO, consumer products must meet the "general safety requirements". C&ED can take enforcement action against providers of consumer goods, if the goods are proven to pose a potential hazard to consumers.

C&ED and the Department of Health (DH) have found that there is currently no concrete proof that fluorescent brighteners are harmful to human beings – for example, a publication from the Department of Health and the Scottish Executive in the United Kingdom (1995), an assessment by the Federal Institute for Health Protection of Consumers and Veterinary Medicine in Germany (2001), and a voluntary study program carried out by the Household Cleaning Products and the Chemical Industry in European Union (2004) all indicate that there is no firm evidence to show that fluorescent brighteners are hazardous to human health. Therefore, at present there is no basis for enforcement action against products containing fluorescent brighteners.

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