



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to The Editor

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Government must stop the use of banned antibiotics in our shrimps

The furore over the banning of shrimp and prawns from Malaysia by the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) because it contained banned antibiotics drew bizarre responses some bordering on the absurd.

The fact is the two antibiotics Chloramphenicol and Nitrofurans are banned for use in Malaysia since 1985. Yet they continue to pop up in our farmed fisheries and farmed meat products.

Chloramphenicol is a broad spectrum antibiotic important for use in humans. It can cause dose independent aplastic anaemia which can be fatal. USFDA banned Chloramphenicol in food production in 1984. Nitrofurans are a group of broad spectrum antibiotics important for use in humans. Due to concerns that the drug can be cancer causing and harmful to human health, the USFDA banned the use of nitrofurans in food producing animals in 1991 while Furaltadone (another type of nitrofurantoin) was prohibited earlier in 1985. Dietary exposure to nitrofurans in animals have caused tumours.

Toxic and carcinogenic Chloramphenicol and Nitrofurans have no acceptable daily intake (ADI) and maximum residue limits (MRLs) established. They are both banned for use in food producing animals in most countries. Regulatory authorities generally adopt a zero tolerance approach for veterinary drugs without an established ADI-MRL.

In other words there is 'no safe level of residues' for these drugs. Any food containing residues of these drugs at any concentration is deemed 'not fit for human consumption'.

On Saturday last, the Health Minister said Malaysia was able to reduce the rejection rate of exported prawns to only two shipments in September last year compared with 66 in August.

USFDA's Import Alert 16-136 dated 18 April 2016, revealed that from October 1 2014 through September 2015 USFDA detected a significant increase in the presence of Nitrofurans and Chloramphenicol residues in shrimp products from Peninsular Malaysia. Of the 138 shrimp samples collected, 45 samples (32 percent) tested positive for Nitrofurans residues and or Chloramphenicol residues.

According to Food and Water Watch, a US based research organisation, the USFDA rejected 20 percent seafood shipments from Malaysia. This was about twice the overall refusal rate of 10 percent. The main reason was that the fish imports contain illegal antibiotics.

Between 2010-2014, Malaysia stood out as having the highest percentage of US FDA Import Refusals for illegal antibiotics, when compared to China and Vietnam. Vietnam had less than 20 percent and China had about 40 percent of its seafood shipments rejected by the USFDA, Malaysia topped the list with around 60 percent.

Another USFDA Import Alert dated 11 March 2016 showed that most of the companies which had their

products detained were from Malaysia. Bangladesh and China had one company each and India had 8 companies affected by the detention order while 29 companies from Malaysia were involved. Out of these, 20 were located in Penang.

USFDA inspects only around **two percent** of imported seafood. But even this limited amount of sampling reveals how severe the problems are with farm fish imported from Malaysia.

Contrary to what the Selangor Fisheries Department Director imagines that the USFDA rejection of Malaysia's shrimp and prawns shipment 'could be a false alarm' the current situation concerning veterinary drug violations occurring in Malaysia's farmed fish industry is indeed a cause for alarm.

The presence of Chloramphenicol and Nitrofurans in our meat and fish is not new. In the late 1980s CAPs investigations showed commercial pig and poultry farms using Chloramphenicol. In 1999, a research scientist found Chloramphenicol in chicken meat. In 2002, the Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary revealed that Nitrofurans and Chloramphenicol had been found in chickens tested.

To date no one has been charged for selling such contaminated foods.

The problem of dangerous and banned drugs in our meats occurs now and again because monitoring and enforcement is illusory and non-existent.

There is no comprehensive legal framework to regulate the use of veterinary drugs in the aquaculture and livestock industry. Veterinary drugs used in the livestock industry are as stipulated in the Food Act 1983 and Food Regulations 1985, which is enforced by the Ministry of Health but drugs used in aquaculture are not covered.

Under this Act, contaminated meat, fish and their products are enforced only at the point of sale. However the use of veterinary drugs at the farm level is not controlled. The Animal Ordinance 1953 has no provision to control or regulate the use of veterinary drugs and their residues in farm animals. The Fisheries Act 1985 does not have laws to control and regulate veterinary drugs used in aquaculture.

In short there are no laws to control and regulate what drugs farmers use for their animals and fish stocks. With no laws to stop farmers from feeding their animals and fish stocks with antibiotics, the Agriculture Ministry is toothless against the contamination of our food supply and or apprehend offenders.

This sad state of affairs could have inspired the Agriculture Minister to declare that the export of frozen prawns from Malaysia to the US is a 'private arrangement' on a 'willing buyer, willing seller basis'.

CAP calls on the government to give utmost priority to:

- Establish a clear and comprehensive regulatory framework for registration of veterinary drugs, inspection and surveillance. Standards should be in line with international standards to ensure safety and effectiveness. There must be effective enforcement.
- Establish a formal mechanism of interaction between the MOH, the DVS and the Department of Fisheries.
- Create national systems to monitor drug usage in food producing animals and fisheries; drug residues; antibiotics use and resistance; and diseases in livestock and aquaculture.

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