

# Food stalls under scrutiny

NEA swings into action as tougher penalties for hygiene lapses kick in

By LESTER KOK

HYGIENE inspectors fanned out all over the island yesterday as tougher penalties for food hygiene lapses came into force.

Most food stalls met the hygiene standards although 12 summonses were issued during the checks.

Of the 12, most were for major offences which included handling food with bare hands and failure to keep the premises clean. Other common offences included cockroach infestations or failing to cover food.

Enforcing tougher penalties is part of attempts by the Government to prevent a repeat of the Geylang Serai Indian rojak food poisoning incident last April.

More than 150 people who ate at the stall fell ill and two, Madam Norani Kassim and Madam Aminah Samijo, died as a result of severe food poisoning.

The new measures were announced in Parliament last month by Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim.

Composition fines now range from \$200 to \$400, depending on the severity of offences. Previously, it was a flat \$100 fine.

The list of offences and the demerit point system - which hands out two, four, and six demerit points to minor, major and serious offences respectively - have not been changed.

Any operator who chalks up 12 points in 12 months will have his licence suspended for two weeks, and will have to



NEA senior environmental health executive Alvin Chew examining the food display of a stall at Block 266 Compassvale Bow yesterday. Food operators who fail to meet the NEA's hygiene standards face a fine and demerit points.

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JOYCE FANG

attend a basic food hygiene course.

Operators who have three suspensions will have their licence revoked by the National Environment Agency (NEA).

NEA will also be increasing the number of enforcement officers patrolling food centres from 63 to 104 by the end of the year.

Currently, it has recruited 15 more officers, bringing the total to 78. With the increase in manpower, hygiene checks will also increase from the current three to up to eight a year.

Seven stall operators at Block 266 Compassvale Bow in Sengkang were subjected to spot checks yesterday and all passed with a clean bill.

One of them was an Indian food stall which received its licence three months ago. Ms Bahma, 42, who runs it together with her husband, said it was her first experience of a hygiene inspection.

"He (the inspector) did not give me any bad comments, so I felt happy about it," she said.

Chicken rice seller Tan Heow Jik, 50, also had no complaints from the inspector but was reminded to arrange his crockery and utensils neatly.

Mr Tan, who has been in the food industry for 30 years, said the standards now are much stricter than when he first started out as a street hawker in 1980.

"It's a bit more troublesome but worth the effort as it keeps everyone safe

from food poisoning," he said in Mandarin.

The Sengkang food centre, which has a B grade for all its stalls, has not received any summonses since its opening in 2007.

NEA's head of operations (hygiene) Wong Chiu Ying said the agency had briefed the industry on the new fines by holding dialogues with licensees and stall owners.

Members of the public have also been doing their part by giving NEA tip-offs on food stalls with unhygienic practices.

Last year, 2,214 calls were received by the NEA, up from 1,802 calls the previous year and 1,303 calls in 2007.

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