

Misadventure verdict in death of customers

Food poisoning not an intentional act by stall owner, says coroner

■ BY KIMBERLY SPYKERMAN

THERE was never any doubt that the Indian rojak stall at the Geylang Serai temporary market was unhygienic and poorly maintained.

This finding was put forth yesterday by State Coroner Victor Yeo at the conclusion of an inquiry into the deaths of two women who died last April after eating food from the stall.

Madam Aminah Samijo, 57, and Madam Norani Kassim, 59, were among more than 150 who became ill in one of the Republic's worst incidences of food poisoning in recent years.

The incident sparked a tightening up of inspections across hawker centres islandwide. The Indian rojak stall, which was graded C for its hygiene standards in December 2008, has been ordered closed since the incident.

According to Mr Yeo, claims by stall owner Sheik Alauddin Mohideen, 70, and his four assistants that they adhered to proper hygiene practices seemed "somewhat rehearsed and slanted", as well as "incompatible" with the evidence offered by health officers who visited the stall last April.

Not only did they find the stall dirty and cockroach-infested, swabs taken from various areas there showed traces of salmonella, which is commonly associated with food poisoning, as well as bacteria originating from faeces and human skin. One stall assistant even tested positive for rotavirus, which causes severe diarrhoea.

In recording a verdict of misadventure, Mr Yeo said the incident was "not a deliberate or intentional act" by the stall owner and his assistants, as they were unable to explain how their food came to be contaminated.

But the National Environment Agency said in a statement yesterday that it was reviewing the coroner's findings with the Attorney-General's Cham-

bers to decide on the appropriate action that may be taken against those involved. They declined to elaborate.

Mr Yeo noted that what eventually killed the two women was a bug identified as vibrio parahaemolyticus - commonly found in raw seafood. Calling the incident "unusual and unfortunate", he acknowledged that while death was usually rare in most cases, the infection caused by the bacteria was exacerbated by the women's prior medical conditions, leading to eventual organ failure.

While there is no doubt that the outbreak of food poisoning was directly linked to the stall, what remains a mystery is where exactly the bacteria came from and how the food came to be contaminated, as the stall's workers had thrown away all remnants of the food as soon as his customers began complaining of food poisoning.

In his closing remarks, Mr Yeo said: "It is hoped... that the severity of this food poisoning outbreak and the sad loss of two lives will serve as a con-



Mr Sheik Alauddin Mohideen's rojak stall was found to be dirty and infested by cockroaches. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

stant reminder to all food handlers to strictly observe good food-handling practices and proper personal hygiene practices at all times".

Madam Norani's son, who declined to be named, said that the family, along with Madam Aminah's family, were in talks with lawyers about taking possible legal action.

He added that what he could not accept was that Mr Alauddin had yet to personally call on the families to apologise or offer his condolences.

When approached at his flat yesterday, Mr Alauddin refused to comment further on the matter.

kimspyke@sph.com.sg