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Mr Neo Kee Hong, 71, the owner of Heng Gi Roasted Goose & Duck Meat, is not bothered despite getting his stall hygiene grade downgraded from A to C as his business has not been affected. MPs and people in the food industry said the rating system will work only if customers stop patronising dirty stalls.

Call to review rating system

Mavis Toh

The system of rating hawker stalls for their hygiene levels could do with a review, said MP Halimah Yacob, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health.

A review could look at how effective the system is, how it can be improved, whether standards of cleanliness have declined and how higher standards can be implemented.

"There have been two deaths and this is big-scale in Singapore," she said. "There are issues to look at and definitely room for improvement."

She also suggested deploying "mystery shoppers" to conduct spot checks on hawkers.

Her call comes amid two deaths last week following Singapore's most serious food poisoning case.

Two women – one aged 57 and another 58 – died after eating Indian rojak at the Rojak Geylang Serai in Geylang Serai, and another suffered a miscarriage. At last count, 154 people were struck after eating there, with 48 people warded. Five are still recovering in hospitals.

The hawker hygiene grading system was started in 1997. To arrive at a grade, officers from the National Environment Agency (NEA) do both routine and ad hoc inspections to look at cleanliness, proper housekeeping and food and personal hygiene levels.

A stall which scores 85 per cent and above is graded A. Scoring between 70 per cent and 84 per cent gets a B, 50 per cent and 69 per cent gets a C, and 40 per cent and 49 per cent gets a D. Stalls graded below D are not allowed to operate.

Last year, 23.4 per cent of the

5,228 hawker stalls were graded A and 62.2 per cent got Bs, while 747 stalls got Cs and seven had Ds.

Inspections are carried out once every six to eight weeks. Officers will point out shortfalls and hawkers must rectify the problems. If a hawker accumulates more than 12 points in a year, his licence will be suspended for two weeks. The licence may be revoked for recalcitrant offenders. For minor offences, verbal advice or written warnings may be given. For serious ones, hawkers may be issued with a notice to attend court.

Common offences include operating without a valid licence, fail-

ing to keep the stall clean, using bare hands to handle food, failing to cover cooked food and using dirty or chipped crockery.

The Rojak Geylang Serai had scored a C when NEA officials conducted a check last December.

MPs and food industry players interviewed noted how some stallholders fail to display their grading labels even though they could be fined or given demerit points. In some cases where a stall had been downgraded, the stallholder might still display the old sign.

They added that the system will work only if customers look out for the labelling and stop patronising

dirty stalls. Only then will stallholders feel the impact on their businesses and improve.

Food critic Violet Oon said: "Consumers need to be educated and if they stop going to dirty stalls, it will be greater incentive for hawkers to buck up."

She added that hawkers with C and D grades should be "rehabilitated". She avoids eating at hawkers graded below B.

Cleanliness campaigner Jack Sim also wants hawker centres' toilets graded. His peeve is that many hawkers do not wash their hands with soap after using the toilets because there is none there.

Mr Hong Poh Hin, vice-chairman of the Fochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association, felt that the grading system does help to keep the hawkers on their toes. To maintain their grade, hawkers tend to keep their stalls neat and clean, dress neatly and work to keep out pests, he said.

In the past three years, there has been a yearly average of four food poisoning incidents linked to hawker centre stalls. An average of three people were affected in each incident.

But Dr Ong Seh Hong, an MP for Marine Parade GRC, said that public confidence on food safety and hygiene should not be shaken because of the recent incident.

"The system is in place, we can tweak it to improve, but everyone also has a part to play to improve the cleanliness of our hawker centres," he said.

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Do you think NEA's hygiene grading system of hawkers is effective? E-mail your views to suntimes@sph.com.sg