

# Caterer at school canteen suspended

Under probe for food poisoning, firm may have licence reviewed

■ BY AMANDA TAN

ISS Catering Services has been suspended indefinitely from operating the canteen at the Singapore Sports School (SSS) until investigations into a recent case of mass food poisoning are completed.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) announced the decision yesterday. After taking meals prepared by the caterer, 106 students fell ill last week.

The Singapore firm, which has been in the industry for more than 20 years, will have its licence to operate the canteen reviewed if it is found responsible for the food poisoning incident.

Depending on the findings, NEA can suspend the caterer's licence even if it

has not chalked up 12 demerit points for the year, Mr Satish Appoo, director of NEA's environmental health department, said at a press conference yesterday.

An operator who accumulates 12 demerits in a year is suspended for two weeks. If an operator receives three suspensions, its licence can be revoked.

So far, NEA has not revoked any operator's licence.

ISS Catering's contract with the school will expire next month.

It has tendered for a new contract - as have other operators. The school is now in the process of evaluating all the applicants. Since the food poisoning incident, it has relied on packet food from ISS Catering's central kitchen.

Responding to queries from The Straits Times, school principal Deborah Tan said: "The track record of the caterer is an important criterion in evaluating the tender. In view of the recent incident, the current caterer will be at a severe disadvantage during the evaluation."

This is not the first time that ISS Cater-

ing, which has run the school's canteen since January 2008, has been found wanting in terms of hygiene. In April, it was fined \$500 and given six demerit points for having dirty premises and poor rubbish management at the school.

It was also involved in two earlier food poisoning cases there.

In January last year, 94 people were affected. At the time, NEA did not find any lapses in hygiene, but warned the caterer to maintain high standards of cleanliness.

Nevertheless, two months later, another bout of food poisoning occurred, affecting 77 people. Three of the caterer's food handlers were found to have salmonella, commonly associated with food-borne diseases and bacteria from faeces or human skin. They were suspended from working until they could be certified fit for duty.

A day after the incident, ISS Catering was fined \$200 for using a dirty freezer.

The latest episode at SSS comes amid a growing number of food poisoning cases caused by caterers.

In 2007, only four such incidents were reported here. This year, as of September, there were 10, NEA said yesterday.

When The Straits Times asked if the demerit point system was too lenient, Mr Appoo said that, on the contrary, it was quite easy for operators to accumulate the 12 points stipulated for suspension.

"If you sell dirty, contaminated or unfit food, that is six points. If you throw sullage water (waste water from kitchens) into the drain, that is six points. Failure to register assistants is another six points," he said. "Just two instances in a 12-month period and you face closure."

Demerits range from two for minor offences, such as not displaying licences clearly, to six for more serious lapses, such as selling contaminated food.

NEA said there were other measures in place to ensure food hygiene.

For instance, errant caterers now face heavier fines. Depending on the severity of the offence, they can be fined between \$200 and \$400. Before the rules were revised in April, offenders received a flat

fine of \$100.

NEA will also step up random checks: four times a year for establishments with a Grade A or B hygiene rating, and eight for those with a Grade C or D.

In addition, in the first quarter of next year, NEA will require all caterers to indicate the use-by or expiration date on the food they serve. Currently, the practice is carried out on a voluntary basis only.

The agency is also looking to see if Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification can be made mandatory for all operators. HACCP is an internationally recognised management system for ensuring food safety.

To qualify, operators must satisfy criteria that include ensuring proper food handling and hygienic workplaces. At the moment, certification is not compulsory and only seven out of 322 caterers here have been HACCP-certified by the Singapore Accreditation Council.

ISS Catering, which was given an A grading, is among the seven.

tamanda@sph.com.sg