

[Malaysia]

Food Safety in Malaysia*¹

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Malaysians take food very seriously, but are less concerned about food safety. This is not because of lack of incidents. In 1988 several children died from a combination of boric acid and aflatoxin poisoning. As late as 2008, boric acid could still be detected in many noodle samples.

As food safety has to be maintained from production to consumption, many ministries and agencies are involved in the process. Among them are the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, local authorities and Customs (for import and export of food. Religious authorities are involved, but more for ritual purposes than safety *per se*.

The main legislation regulating food safety is the Food Act 1983. This, with its attendant Food Regulations, came into force in October 1985. It aims to protect the public against food related hazards and frauds, as well as to promote and motivate the preparation, handling, distribution, sale and consumption of safe, high quality food.

Among the strategies for ensuring food safety are the following:

- Review and update legislation and strengthen infrastructure
- Enhance collaboration between government agencies, consumer bodies, academia, industry and international organizations
- Develop and train manpower resources
- Educate consumers to raise their awareness of food safety issues.

Enforcement involves inspection and sam-

pling. A Core Prosecution Team ensures effective court action, while a Crisis Alert Team deals with acute situations. Premises handling, processing and serving food are inspected regularly and food samples are taken for microbiological, chemical and physical tests. Laboratories for these tests have been established nationwide and are expected to conform to standards as outlined in ISO 17025.

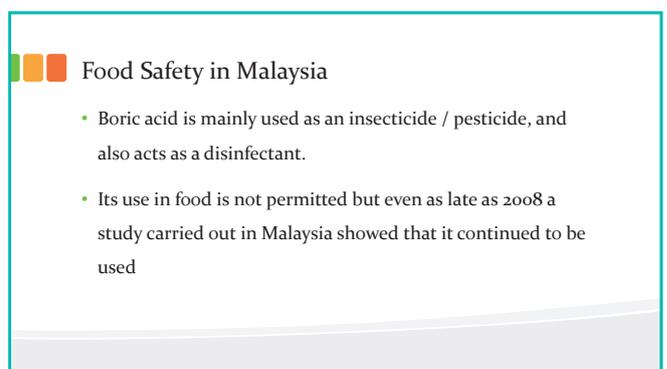
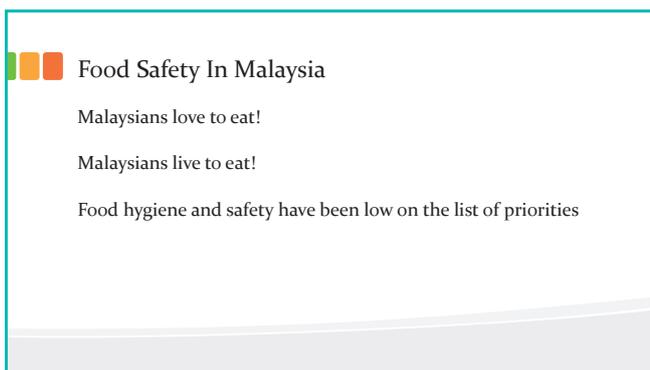
Consumer education is recognized as being a cornerstone of food safety, because educated consumers function as food safety inspectors in their own right. Measures at present rely heavily on schools and the mass media, but it can safely be said that the effect has not been very marked.

Attempts are being made to use IT to educate consumers, but a cursory examination of the Food Safety Information of Malaysia website shows it to be dated, not user-friendly and not really an effective educational resource.

In 2001 a Food Safety and Nutrition Council was set up that functions as the highest advisory body to the government on food safety. It is made up of government agencies and non-governmental organizations. This indicates that the government both understands the importance of food safety and recognizes the gap that still exists in achieving it. For a nation that exports seafood and fruits all over the world, while also being dependent on imported basic foodstuff, food safety is a matter of national security as well as public health.

*¹ This article is based on a presentation made at the Symposium “Ensuring Food Safety: An Important Challenge Today” held at the 30th CMAAO General Assembly and 51st Council Meeting, Yangon, Myanmar, on September 23-25, 2015.

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Food Safety in Malaysia

- The main regulators and enforcers in food safety are:
 - Ministry of Health – EU recognized Competent Authority for HACCP Certification (fish / fish products)
 - Ministry of Agriculture
 - Local Authorities
 - Customs (for import/export activities)
- Religious authorities also get involved in making sure about *halal* status, but this is not strictly a food safety issue

Food Safety in Malaysia

- The main legislation concerning food safety is the Food Act 1983.
- This Act, together with the Food Regulations 1985, came into force on 1st October 1985

Food Safety in Malaysia

- The main aims of this legislation are to protect the public against food related hazards and fraud, as well as to promote and motivate the preparation, handling, distribution, sale and consumption of safe, high quality food

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- In enforcing the Act and improving food safety, the strategies are
 - Review and update legislation and strengthen infrastructure
 - Enhance collaboration between government agencies, consumer bodies, academia, industry and international organisations
 - Develop and train manpower resources
 - Educate consumers to raise their awareness of food safety issues

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- Enforcement is critical to ensuring efficacy of legislation
- This includes inspection and sampling, licensing and inter-agency collaboration
- A Core Prosecution Team ensures effective prosecution.
- A Crisis Alert Team exists to handle acute problems

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- Inspection of premises is done regularly, and cleanliness is graded on a standardized system. Premises which get Grade A are likely to display their certification, but as it is not mandatory, those with less stellar grades choose to remain silent.
- Food is sampled for microbiological, chemical and physical tests

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- Laboratories for testing food samples have been established nationwide.
- The labs are expected to conform to quality systems as outlined in ISO 17025

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- Consumer education is a cornerstone of food safety.
- Enforcement alone does not suffice.
- If consumers do not know what to look for in food safety, unsafe outlets and products will continue to flourish.

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- Consumer education relies heavily on schools and on the mass media
- The importance of Information Technology is recognized in theory

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- Though IT's importance is recognized, going to the website of FoSIM (Food Safety Information of Malaysia) shows that updates are few and far between, and the site itself is not very user-friendly.

Food Safety in Malaysia

- In 2001 the Food Safety and Nutrition Council was set up.
- It is the highest advisory body to the Government on Food Safety Issues.
- It is composed of Government Agencies and NGOs

Food Safety in Malaysia

- The Ministry of Health is taking steps to
 - Strengthen food legislation
 - Strengthen laboratory services
 - Increase research activities
 - Improve Quality Assurance program
 - Increase international collaboration

Food Safety in Malaysia

- In conclusion, legislative measures and technical resources for ensuring food safety are reasonably adequate, and measures are being taken to strengthen them
- Public education is lacking, and apathy towards food hygiene is the rule