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Action on hygiene

With a cholera outbreak, a German measles epidemic and deadly bacteria turning up in food supplies, Hong Kong is not going to win any prizes for health and hygiene. After the horror stories in the media this week, restaurateurs will be lucky to avoid a serious fall-off in clients.

The real problem is the disclosure of the unwholesome procedures followed by at least some local suppliers, and the way they have been able to go on operating. It is, for example, deeply worrying to learn that a shop where the deadly E-coli bacteria has been found twice in two months can go on trading, even though it has been prosecuted nine times in the past.

The present system, under which licences are only revoked after a fourth suspension, is wholly inadequate. Environmental health officers should be able to close premises the instant that public health is seriously threatened. The Government needs to look again at the regulations to see where they can be tightened.

A report in February showed that 1,820 cases of food poisoning were recorded the previous year. Com-

plaints about food increased from 367 in 1995 to 641 last year, with reports of cockroaches, glass and hair found in dishes. The official explanation for the increase is the growing public awareness and willingness to complain, but it is undeniable that hygiene standards in some parts of Hong Kong vary from average to non-existent. It is, for instance, common to see animal carcasses lying on the dirty floors of butcher's shops.

When Hong Kong was a fresh water source for passing ships, the sea-food caught in pristine seas would be processed on clean beaches: this process has not changed in 150 years, but the environment certainly has. And dried food firms in heavily congested areas still string out goods on traffic barriers to be showered by exhaust fumes and all the grime of the city. Too much of our fish is contaminated with arsenic and other heavy metals.

The environment will take years to heal, but hygiene standards can be improved much more swiftly. The events of this month show that this is a task the authorities should begin without delay.