

20 Feb. 1989

Alert for cheese bacteria

By Karl Ho

GOVERNMENT inspectors are on special alert for imported cheese brands carrying potentially deadly bacteria.

Following an alarm highlighted by Japanese health authorities, it was revealed that in Hongkong there have been 10 incidents in which the deadly bacterium listeria has been found in food imported to Hongkong.

The Hygiene Division of the Municipal Services Branch found a brand of French cheese containing the bacteria only last month, said the Hygiene Adviser of the division, Dr Ron Perry.

"No cases of infection (of people) have been reported so far. The wholesaler of the cheese surrendered the whole stock for destruction voluntarily after the inspection," he said.

This is said to be the same bacteria found in French and Dutch cheese recently imported into Japan. The Japanese government has ordered

the cheese to be recalled immediately, even though no human infections have been reported.

The bacteria affect the nervous system and results in fever and cause pregnant women to miscarry.

The bacteria killed 29 people who ate contaminated products in the United States in 1985, according to a news report from Japan.

The 10 cases of the bacteria in Hongkong showed up in random testing of more than 120 samples of imported food products, Dr Perry explained.

The infected foods were mostly dairy products such as cheese, milk, ice cream and butter. It was also found in raw meats, he said.

In each of the incidents the importers voluntarily surrendered the contaminated foodstuff for destruction and there was no human infection.

A special watch is being kept by food inspectors of

the Municipal Services Branch for several brands of French and Dutch cheese reported in Japan as containing the potentially deadly bacteria.

The brands of French cheese with the bacteria were listed by the news agency.

It was found that more than 100 kilogrammes of cheese of the brands named had been sold in Japan but no cases of infection had so far been reported, said Mr Hiroshi Hattoria, a spokesman for the Tokyo metropolitan government's Public Health Bureau.

Hongkong food inspectors will be alert for the inspection of those brands of cheese, particularly at the airport, said an Assistant Staff Officer of the division, Mr Luk Shu-kay.

Under the existing monitoring system, all imported foods have to undergo inspection while samples are also taken from supermarkets and foodstores for testing, he said.

"But the Government has no record of these brands being on sale in the territory," Mr Luk said.

Wholesalers and major retailers also said the brands reported infested with the bacteria in Japan were not available in the territory.

Mr Richard Yeung Man-chung of Oliver's Delicatessen said the brands were not among the 400-odd varieties of cheese available for sale in the store.

"They probably belong to the blue cheese category which contain bacteria in order to add flavour to the cheese. But all cheese available in the store are certified by the producing countries to be free of harmful germs," Mr Yeung said.

Two of the biggest supermarkets, Welcome and Park'n Shop, confirmed that these brands are also not on sale in their stores.