

PROVIDING COOKING FACILITIES IN ALL DORMITORIES MAY BE ANOTHER SOLUTION

Catered food for workers needs more regulation, say researchers

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SINGAPORE – The authors of a study that highlighted the dismal quality of food that Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore were being fed have called for greater government regulation of such caterers.

The workers were provided catered food that was “foul-smelling”, “rock solid” and lacking in nutrition as it had been prepared hours in advance. The issue flummoxed many when TODAY reported on the preliminary findings of the study in March. The news report was widely circulated for more than a week and has since prompted two to three food-business owners to volunteer help to rectify the situation.

In a White Paper summarising findings from a two-year study released

yesterday, researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and non-governmental organisation HealthServe said regulating caterers would be an “important step towards ensuring food safety and security”. “We learnt about the large number of unlicensed operators that operate without accountability. These unlicensed caterers often work through middlemen and are unable to control the quality of food,” they wrote.

At a press conference yesterday, Professor Mohan J Dutta, director of NUS’ Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation, which co-authored the White Paper, added: “Caterers who are not licensed (have) a variety of practices, such as food being left outside the dorm. And often, we hear stories of rats pulling away at the food.”

Currently, the National Environment Agency requires all caterers to be licensed. Packed food would have to come with time stamps, indicating when it was prepared and by when it has to be consumed.

Apart from greater oversight of these businesses, HealthServe director Goh Wei Leong said providing cooking facilities in all dormitories could be a solution. Foreign workers may also save costs by pooling money for ingredients.

The researchers’ findings also showed that foreign workers often liaise with a middleman for meals to be delivered to their dormitories. About a quarter of the average S\$120 to S\$130 they pay each month for the meals goes to the middleman, leaving the caterers scrimping on quality ingredients, said Prof Dutta, who sug-

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gested that employers work directly with caterers. “That’s so that the food is directly catered to a worksite. That could prevent the gap between the cooking and the delivery. Employers will have more ability to control the quality because they’ll be negotiating with the vendor,” added Prof Dutta.

Yesterday, CARE and HealthServe launched a campaign to raise awareness of the food woes of foreign workers through bus and MRT ads and a TV commercial. A documentary will also be released online later this month. Materials for the campaign came from the interviews, focus-group discussions and surveys with Bangladeshi construction workers conducted between September 2012 and December last year.

A survey pertaining to the quality and hygiene of food, which involved 500 Bangladeshi migrant workers, showed 86.2 per cent had fallen ill after eating catered food. Common illnesses include vomiting. More than nine in 10 felt their food was unhygienic. Nearly all respondents (97.4 per cent) were dissatisfied with the quality of their food, with some describing it as “bread (that) is so tough, it ... feels like eating a tyre”.