

23 November 2007

Letter

By : S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS, for Consumers Association of Penang

THE Health Ministry is making a mockery of the food regulations as the use of Rhodamine B in food is still rampant in spite of it being banned more than 50 years ago.

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In our latest test conducted this month, we found Rhodamine B present in six samples of *belacan* and one sample of *huat kuih*. These samples were bought from the same places in Kuala Lumpur and Penang when we did our test in April and May.

In the test, Rhodamine B was found in five samples of *belacan* and eight samples of various Chinese cakes (*mi ku*, *siew koo* and *huat kuih*). The samples of *belacan* were bought at a famous wet market in Kuala Lumpur, while the cakes, at various wet markets in Penang.

The Consumers Association of Penang first detected the presence of Rhodamine B in *belacan* in 1973. Since then, tests conducted in 1983, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 and May this year found this dye to be present in *belacan* and other foods. On each occasion when we found this dye in food, a letter was sent to the ministry requesting it to investigate.

However, we regret that the situation has not changed. This dye is still used in food in spite of it being banned. Rhodamine B is a cancer-causing agent and is not supposed to be used as a colouring agent for food. It is meant only for dyeing plastic goods and textiles. Under the Food Regulation 1985, Rhodamine B is not allowed for use in food. Offenders may face a fine not exceeding RM5,000 or imprisonment not exceeding two years or both. Cancer is the No 1 killer in Malaysia and it is affecting an increasing number of Malaysians. The consumption of cancer-causing agents in food is a major cause of cancer. In view of our latest findings, the Consumers Association of Penang once again calls on the ministry to take the following actions:

- Strictly enforce the Food Regulations 1985;
- Investigate and prosecute any person found using dyes in food items which the law does not allow to be coloured;
- Stop the sale of industrial-grade dyes (banned for food) in small quantities to prevent misuse;
- Discourage food operators and manufacturers from using chemical dyes since they are dangerous and totally unnecessary;
- Conduct media campaign to discourage consumers from purchasing food item that contain dyes and educate them on how to read food labels properly; and,
- Conduct frequent tests on all food items sold to ensure that they are free from banned dyes and toxic chemicals