

LESSONS from the "IR" INCIDENTS

There's a lot to be learnt in the aftermath of the two "IR" incidents. The latest "IR" fiasco caused 154 individuals to be hospitalised. One lady had a miscarriage and regrettably two deaths occurred. I am taking about the "Indian Rojak" incident which occurred in the temporary market in Geylang Serai. It could have occurred with some other food in another place but, coincidentally, yet another "Indian Rojak" incident in Geylang Serai (1996) involving the common seafood bacterium vibrio parahaemolyticus left 35 others sick.

In an interesting article, hawkers were asked about some of the things that they would look out for when they patronise other food stalls. One confessed he ignored the NEA ratings and gave the following good counsel instead. I have supplemented his points with my own observations and some of the "insider knowledge" I garnered from internet forums. Here goes:

1. Environment: If the store looks dirty and messy, it would likely attract cockroaches and rats.
2. Environment: Are there adequate washing facilities? What is the state of the hawker centre toilet? (Note: 1 in 3 Singaporeans do not wash their hands after visiting the toilet).
3. Hawkers: Look at their hair, hands, fingernails, clothes, and, yes, their "cleaning cloth".
4. Food preparation: Observe the area where the food is prepared; how the food is handled; how the hawker handles money and uses (and reuses) the plastic gloves. The "de rigueur" way of carrying cups and plates seems to be to stick the fingers inside the cups or the plates prior to serving your food and drinks in them
5. Utensils: Are they properly washed and kept? Or are they placed in containers such that customers have to handle the "eating end" of the chopsticks or fork or spoon?
6. Popularity: I am not sure if the popularity of a stall is always associated with good hygiene (the recent "IR" food poisoning stall was rated 2.5 out of 3 chopsticks in the 2007 Makansutra Food Guide). The logic is that if a lot of people eat there and do not get sick, the store must be all right. I suppose there is some truth in it. It is also possible that many of us "close one or both eyes" to the way hawker food is prepared and handled.

I don't know about you but I am keeping my eyes open!

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