# NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

**FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION NO. 1748**

**DATE OF PUBLICATION IN INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER: 1 JUNE 2018**

**(INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER NO. 19)**

**Ms A Steyn (DA) to ask the Minister of Health:**

(1) In the aftermath of his department’s response to the listeriosis outbreak, (a) what kind of regulatory measures is his department considering in order to ensure food health and safety, (b) what sort of consultations has his department had with the various industries in relation to the listeriosis outbreak and (c)(i) who was consulted and (ii) what information was obtained during these consultations;

(2) (a) when will proposed guidelines on levels of Listeria monocytogenes be published to serve as minimum standard for the industry and (b) will the standards apply only to the meat processing industry or will they be applicable across all food categories and their related value chains;

(3) whether any interim guidelines or an interim protocol for the food sector on Listeria levels will be published so that industry is clear on what basis they can operate; if not, will the industry continue to operate on 100 cfus per gram in a 25 g sample, as is currently the practice;

(4) what are the acceptable levels of Listeria monocytogenes that he has considered;

(5) (a) what is his policy position on the establishment of an independent food health and safety agency to align all areas of food handling and manufacturing regulation and (b) what action will he take to support the existence of such an agency?

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**REPLY:**

1. (a) The confirmed source of the Listeriosis outbreak, immediately triggered Regulation 4(b) in the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System (HACC) Regulations (R908 of 2003) which requires the mandatory application of the Hazard analysis and Critical Control Point system, audited by the South African National Accreditation System (SANAS) accredited certifying bodies.

The review of the National Health Act, 2003 as well as the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972 is underway to allow for the incorporation of reporting requirements for food testing.

 (b) The South African Meat Processors Association (SAMPA) was consulted through official correspondence as well as a formal meeting.

 (c) (i) SAMPA;

 (ii) The industry association indicated that as they represent more than 60% of the Ready To Eat (RTE) processing industry, they have no objection that the sector be required to implement the mandatory Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system. Levels for *Listeria Monocytogenes* for the products that they manufactured were clarified in relation to the levels adopted by teh Codex Alimentaius, the joint World Health Organisation and Food and Agricultural Organisation, food standards setting body for protecting consumers and facilitating trade.

1. (a) The guideline levels will be published following extensive consultation with the industry as well as other important stakeholders such as academics, epidemiologists and consumers.

 (b) The regulated levels will cover all food categories that are considered as ready to eat.

1. Owing to the risk that these ready to eat meat products pose, a zero tolerance is observed until the outbreak has been contained.

According to the internationally accepted Codex Alimentarius, the current industry practice of 10 cfm/gram in a 25g sample is only applicable for foodstuffs that do not promote the growth of *Listeria monocytogenes*. Ready to eat processed products implicated in the outbreak promote the growth of *Listeria monocytogenes* and the internationally agreed level is absent when tested according to the sampling plan.

1. The international guidance has been considered. Consultation referred to in (2)(a) above will need to explore whether a zero tolerance needs to be considered owing to the new scientific research regarding the emerging nature and virulence of *Listeria monocytogenes* and the current health status of the South African population.
2. (a) The relevant authorities (Department of Health; Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Department of Trade and Industry with its two entities (National Consumer Commission and National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications) have been tasked to review the existing food control system, including legislation and recommend the best way to regulate food safety in the country.

 (b) Once the review has been finalised by all parties involved, it will then be taken to the relevant stakeholders for the requisite consultation and comment.

END.