



Speech by

Michael Choi

MEMBER FOR CAPALABA

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FOOD AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CHOI (Capalaba—ALP) (12.24 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Food Amendment Bill 2006. This bill amends the existing Food Act, which has been in existence since 1981. In my opinion, this bill will improve the food regulation process in Queensland.

As the minister outlined in his second reading speech, this bill has been several years in the making. As part of the preparation of this bill, Queensland Health consulted widely with other state agencies, local governments, food industry representatives, consumer groups as well as the not-for-profit sector of our community. I take this opportunity to thank all the parties who had input into the formation of this bill, which will ultimately achieve much better health outcomes for all Queenslanders. I also recognise and commend the minister and his staff for their commitment and dedication to the health of Queenslanders.

It is the government's responsibility—and through the introduction of this bill it is obvious that it takes that responsibility very seriously—to ensure that the food that Queenslanders consume is safe. Clearly, this bill is a demonstration of this government's commitment to the public health and safety of all Queenslanders.

It is a reality that food poisoning has a far-reaching and devastating impact on many Queensland families, which, in turn, has a radical and negative impact on business and the Queensland economy as a whole. Most importantly, food poisoning can also create chaos and wreck the family unit. Recently, I read an article on Channel 7's *Today Tonight* web site. I was stunned to learn of the circumstances of one young mother who almost died from one of Australia's worst cases of food poisoning. Before this young mother ate contaminated salami she was an attractive and happily married mother of four children. Doctors worked miracles on her, but her face and body were terribly disfigured from that extreme case of food poisoning.

Mr Rickuss: Was that Garibaldi?

Mr CHOI: Yes. This young mother's baby was terrified of her because she looked horrific. She was lucky to be alive as she suffered organ failure, she lost her legs below the knee, had all her fingers amputated and her nose almost dropped off. The impact of food poisoning on her life was tragic. Her marriage failed because her husband could not cope with her appearance—and that does not say much for this man. This young mother is still undergoing expensive plastic surgery on her road to recovery.

This is one incident of food poisoning of many thousands that happen daily. Thankfully, not all cases of food poisoning are as severe as that one. The Food Safety Information Council reports that every year five million Australians get sick from eating food contaminated by bacteria or viruses. Based on that figure, food poisoning costs the community over \$3.75 billion each year through lost earnings and medical expenses. Apart from that, the sufferers of food poisoning have a pretty unpleasant experience.

The Food Amendment Bill has been formulated to be as user friendly as possible for all stakeholders. That has been achieved by setting out a three-tiered framework by which to regulate food safety in this state. The first tier is the basic requirement that all food businesses that are not exempt from the legislation must handle and sell food safely and comply with the national Food Standards Code. The

second tier requires food manufacturers and food businesses that sell unpackaged foods, for example, restaurants, takeaway food stores and caterers, to be licensed. To obtain a licence, applicants must satisfy certain criteria to prove their ability to provide safe food. The third tier requires high-risk food businesses, for example, on-site and off-site caterers and private hospitals, to prepare, implement and maintain a food safety program in addition to being licensed.

With regard to the auditing of food businesses, Safe Food Queensland is a government initiative which was established to ensure the reliability and safety of the Queensland food chain. It was set up by the government to ensure that this state's food supply remains one of the safest in the world. Because safety can be easily compromised at any point in the food production process, Safe Food Queensland was established to address the entire food chain, beginning with farm input and ending with products on retail shelves. Food safety programs are also implemented by Safe Food Queensland. A food safety program is a written plan that shows how each business is managing food safely. The ultimate objective is to ensure that these programs are implemented in all primary industries that have an identified food safety hazard.

The issues involving the Food Amendment Bill are complex and many, particularly with regard to the continued auditing of food businesses. This bill provides for internal review and appeal processes, monitoring, investigative and enforcement powers—all of which are provided for in the detailed content of this bill. It is hard enough to safeguard Queenslanders from food poisoning due to unhealthy practices. It is even more devastating to manage food poisoning due to ill intent or even criminal activities as evident in some recent high profile cases involving regional and national companies. But the Beattie Labor government is determined to do just that.

The bill imposes a new obligation on food businesses to report to Queensland Health immediately—and I highlight the word 'immediately'—after they form a reasonable suspicion that food has been intentionally contaminated. To assist food businesses to understand this obligation, Queensland Health has prepared information resources, developed in conjunction with key industry bodies. These materials will assist food businesses to understand what food tampering is, how to respond to food tampering and how to recover from a food tampering incident. That sort of thing would not include keeping their mouth shut. The resource materials will be available for the food industry when the legislation commences, and they include a brochure, a poster and a guide on how to prevent, investigate and respond to food-tampering incidents. A fact sheet has also been developed to assist consumers to recognise food tampering, with information about who to contact if they believe food may have been intentionally contaminated.

Information on food tampering will also be available for food businesses and consumers on the Queensland Health web site when the legislation commences. The information highlights that mandatory reporting applies only to suspected intentional contamination of food. Before the bulk of the act commences on 1 July, there will be additional written and internet resources available to assist food businesses to understand their obligations. Queensland Health will continue to work with the industry to ensure that information about the Food Act and specifically about suspected food tampering is widely available.

A 24-hour telephone hotline will also be available to respond to reports of suspected food tampering when this legislation commences. Contact centre staff will have clear guidance on how to respond to reports of food tampering. When a telephone notification of suspected tampering is made, the contact centre will provide some preliminary advice and will contact an on-call Queensland Health officer who will contact the food business. The Queensland Health officer will be someone with the knowledge and skills to assess the situation and will have delegated authority from the director-general to give directions to the food business.

Queensland Health is developing procedures and guidelines to ensure that there is a rapid response to food-tampering incidents. Queensland Health will work with the Queensland Police Service also to ensure that there is a rapid and appropriate response to reports of suspected intentional contamination of food. The scale of response will be commensurate with an assessment of the seriousness of the reported incident and, where appropriate, will involve an accident management team headed by the Queensland Police Service. Queensland Health will continue to provide advice for food businesses about prevention, management and recovery from incidents of intentional food contamination.

It is the intention of this government, through implementing responsible legislation such as this, to reduce the number of Queenslanders getting sick from food poisoning. Food-borne illness is on the rise worldwide, and at a national level the financial cost runs into billions of dollars. It is clear that traditional management strategies to date have not provided the required levels of protection to consumers. As the minister detailed previously, every year each Queenslander has a 22 per cent chance of contracting a food-borne illness, which can vary from mild physical discomfort to far more serious side effects including long-term illnesses or even death. The Food Amendment Bill 2006 is reassurance for public confidence. The public can feel comfortable in knowing that their health and safety issues are being taken seriously by the Beattie Labor government. I commend the bill to the House.