



Authorities ensure safe food

by Isabel Basson

In the August edition of *M&J Retail*, we spoke to Dries Pretorius, director of food control, about the national environmental health responsibilities of the Department of Health. He pointed out that the provincial and local bodies are responsible for the functional aspects of environmental health. *M&J Retail* spoke to the Tshwane Health Department to ascertain exactly what these functions entail.

The National Health Department performs various functions, one being environmental health. Environmental health entails the following:

- Water quality monitoring
- Food control
- Waste management
- Health surveillance of premises
- Surveillance and prevention of communicable diseases
- Vector control
- Disposal of the dead
- Chemical safety
- Environmental air, noise, land and soil pollution control.

At a national level the department is not involved with industry on a day-to-day basis, this is the responsibility of the local authorities and more specifically the Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs).

Role of local authorities

The broad functions of local authorities include health promotion services, inter-sectoral collaboration and community participation. Among others, they also render environmental health services to communities. These services relate to:

- Maintaining hygienic conditions in its area of jurisdiction
- Investigating complaints
- Enforcing relevant legislation
- Identifying and controlling health hazards.

The statutory mandate of local authorities related to food control derives firstly from the authorisation of individual local authorities by the Minister of Health to enforce the provisions of the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act (No 54 of 1972) and the regulations published thereunder within its area of jurisdiction. Secondly, it is also empowered

by the Health Act (No 63 of 1977). Apart from stating the responsibility of all local authorities to render environmental health services that include food safety control, the regulations published under the Health Act provide for various food hygiene related regulations.

Local authorities have various responsibilities with regard to food safety control. These include:

- Issuing certificates of acceptability in terms of Regulation 918 of the Health Act
- Law enforcement based on inspections of food premises and sampling of foodstuffs (including milk and other perishable foodstuffs)
- Health education of food processors, handlers and consumers, especially within the informal sector
- Advising existing and prospective entrepreneurs on requirements related to food premises and the safe handling of food
- Controlling illegal imported foodstuffs offered for sale within their areas of jurisdiction
- Investigating and introducing appropriate control measures of all incidences of food-borne diseases that come to their attention
- Investigating and taking remedial action of all food safety-related complaints received

- Health certification of foodstuffs destined for export in line with national guidelines.

EHPs

The aforesaid functions are performed in a municipality by EHPs who are all registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Each EHP is given a specific area of jurisdiction and accepts full responsibility for the food safety of all retail and processing sectors in this area.

The Tshwane Department of Health regards the consumer as its client, therefore rendering a service to consumers by ensuring safe and wholesome food. This service is delivered directly by the EHPs. Local departments often form partnerships with other sectors such as the Dairy Standard Agency to strengthen their abilities, especially for financial reasons, but also to share knowledge and experience.

The responsibility to provide consumers with safe and healthy products is, however, not the sole task of government. Every role-player in the farm-to-fork process has to do its part in the upkeeping of regulations, thus ensuring the highest quality possible. **M&J R**

