

Judge rules misadventure

But it remains unsure whether hawker can resume his business

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SINGAPORE — This much is clear: The food poisoning outbreak last April which killed two women and caused 152 others to fall ill was caused by bacteria-contaminated food from Mr Sheik Allaudin Mohideen's stall.

What will remain unresolved, however — because of a lack of evidence — is how the contamination happened at the Indian rojak stall at the Geylang Serai Temporary Market, a coroner's court found yesterday.

In his findings for the inquest into the deaths of Madam Aminah Samijo, 57, and Madam Norani Kasim, 59, State Coroner Victor Yeo said he had "strong reservations" about the general cleanliness of the stall and the hygiene standards of its workers.

He was satisfied, however, that the evidence produced by investigators did not suggest that the food

poisoning incident was "a deliberate or intentional act". The police did not suspect foul play either.

He thus recorded a verdict of misadventure on the fatalities.

Mdm Aminah and Mdm Norani had died from septicaemia — or blood poisoning — and multi-organ failure after being infected by the *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* bug.

Both suffered food poisoning hours after patronising Mr Allaudin's stall on Apr 4 last year.

While the findings yesterday did not directly impugn Mr Allaudin's culpability, whether the 70-year-old hawker, who has operated his stall for the past 15 years, can resume his business remains to be seen.

The National Environment Agency issued a statement yesterday saying it is, together with the Attorney-General's Chambers, reviewing the findings in order to "decide the appropriate action that may be taken against involved parties".

State Coroner Yeo could not determine how the food got tainted because Mr Allaudin's stall helpers had discarded all food samples and cleaned up the stall by the time

MOH officials got there.

The source of the bacterium — which comes from raw seafood — also could not be found because the entire hawker centre was being given a massive clean-up when Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority officials went to collect samples.

Nevertheless, as the transmission of the "epidemic outbreak" ceased once the stall closed, it implicated the food items at the stall, said the coroner.

He also found the testimonies from those who worked at the stall — that they observed a high standard of hygiene — were "contrary to what the other objective evidence revealed" and "somewhat rehearsed".

For instance, faecal matter had been found on the chopping board at the stall as well as on the raw vegetables used in making the gravy.

Speaking to reporters outside the courtroom yesterday, Mdm Norani's son said while they were relieved to have found closure, the family was also exploring their legal options with lawyers.

Mr Allaudin was not in court yesterday.