

Tobacco companies legally licensed to kill

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LATE last month, when his deputy allegedly said that "doctors are licensed to kill", the minister of health was quick to dissociate himself from the statement and throw his support behind the doctors.

Indeed, this was a wise thing to do because there is little to support such an "allegation". All health professionals subscribe to the principle: "first do no harm"...

But what if there is sufficient evidence? What if it is the tobacco industry? One wonders if the minister would react the same way.

Evidence abounds that "tobacco kills" and that those licensed to sell tobacco-related products are literally therefore "licensed to kill".

For example, as early as Feb 4 this year, World Cancer Day directed a simple message to parents: "Second-hand smoke is a health hazard for you and your family. There is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke. Give your child a smoke-free childhood."

In fact, around 700 million children — almost half of the world's children — are said to breathe air polluted by tobacco smoke, particularly at home.

What this means is that anyone involved in promoting such deadly consequences must be made equally responsible and accountable.

Above all, the Ministry of Health cannot be absolved from such responsibility and accountability.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, to which Malaysia is a signatory, has categorically called on member countries to implement scientifically proven measures to limit, if not eliminate, tobacco use and its impact.

Much of this has to do with the marketing network that has been built by the tobacco companies over decades. They spend billions of dollars worldwide on advertising, promotion and sponsorship in exercising their "licence" to kill. Some in the form of not so subtle kick-backs and bribes!

Aptly enough, this year's theme for World No Tobacco Day 2008, which falls on May 31 annually, is "Tobacco-Free Youth: Break the Tobacco Marketing Net".

There are two new critical messages conveyed this year, firstly that tobacco marketing can contribute to disability and death, and, secondly, a complete ban on advertising, sponsorship and promotion is highly effective for tobacco control as it reduces experimentation and initiation to tobacco use.

Recent data from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey indicate a worrying increase in tobacco use among adolescent girls in many countries.

And much of this increase has been attributed to aggressive marketing tactics by the tobacco industry, which encourages potential users, especially adolescents, to try tobacco and become addicted to it as long-term consumers.

In Malaysia, about 20,000 have been recruited in the past two years, according to some sources.

For as long as the "licence to kill" is valid, the "killing" of more than 10,000 Malaysians annually will continue.

Tobacco use is today recognised as one of the chief preventable causes of death globally. WHO attributes five million deaths a year to tobacco use. The figure is expected to rise to about 10 million deaths a year by 2020, with seven million of these deaths mostly in developing countries.

More than 80 per cent of the world's 1.8 billion young people (aged 10 to 24) in developing countries are aggressively being targeted by the tobacco industry through its extensive marketing network.

Four out of five teenagers living in developing countries say they have recently seen pro-tobacco advertising which is designed to undermine cultural beliefs against cigarette-smoking. Not surprisingly, there is a sharp rise in the use of tobacco products even among young women.

With such stark statistics, what is then stopping the Ministry of Health from revoking the "licence to kill" given

to the tobacco industry when there are more than enough reasons for them to stop it a long time ago?

How much longer does the ministry want to play the role of a clandestine "accomplice" when one of WHO's six "MPower" strategies is to combat tobacco use and prevent premature deaths through a total ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

It is long overdue and the ministry, under its new leadership, should follow the lead of other committed countries in curbing the licence to kill so that the lives of many innocent Malaysians are spared annually from the poison of the tobacco companies.

After all, if doctors are not entitled to such a licence, why must an industry with an unscrupulous track record be allowed to be legally licensed to do it?

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