

10,000 deaths that go unnoticed every year

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LAST week, Malaysia lost another entrepreneur closely associated with the automotive industry. Like the late Tan Sri Yahya Ahmad of Proton, the demise of Tan Sri S.M. Nasimuddin S.M. Amin will leave a lasting mark on Malaysia's emerging car industry.

Nasimuddin died of lung cancer at the young age of 53 in Los Angeles where he had been undergoing treatment after discovering that he was suffering from an advanced stage of lung cancer.

What is sad is how victims of this preventable scourge go down real fast once they pass a certain stage even without knowing it. To lose an astute entrepreneur, who had created a multi-million empire, in this way is very sad.

The achievements of this brilliant businessman began when he ventured out on his own at an early age of 21. "I scrimped and saved every sen I got from the money I received from my parents since my schooldays and what I earned helping my father in his construction business," he was quoted as saying in 2006.

Today, the Naza Group he owned is involved in many businesses, ranging from automotive to manufacturing, transport service, engineering, plantations, property, hotel operations and insurance.

The group also holds the franchise to import many makes of luxury cars.

At this point, perhaps it is worthwhile digressing and recalling Malaysia's crusade against smoking, which has become synonymous with lung cancer.

The prime minister was roped in to launch the catchy "Tak Nak" campaign. We thought that was the last nail on the coffin for the smoking habit among Malaysians.

As it turned out, it was just another smoke-screen. It was later officially declared a failure — millions of ringgit had gone up in smoke!

There was a promise of a relaunch but it never came. These were just empty promises. Malaysians continue to die of smoking.

Even if not all are persons of high profile, many could have made the nation proud, all the same.

In contrast, our neighbouring countries are making significant progress, with many enviable success stories in tobacco control.

Like Malaysia, they too have ratified the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control agreement, taking three years to place limits on the production, sale, distribution and advertising of cigarettes, and to formulate anti-smoking policies, including increased taxation on cigarettes.

For Malaysia, the three years are almost up and we have practically little to show for it; it has been more of an embarrassment instead. What has gone wrong?

More than a month has passed since we read that the newly-appointed health minister would soon be "looking" at 13 pictorial graphic health warnings against cigarette smoking.

But this is an old initiative which other countries have already implemented and we are still at the "looking" stage!

It was a disgrace to see a full-page placement by a cigarette company advertising its brand of "exclusive eyewear" in a newspaper adjacent to a page carrying the prime minister's statement describing Nasimuddin's death as a great loss to the country.

As we mourn the passing of Nasimuddin, we must also grieve the deaths of more than 10,000 Malaysians due to smoking-related illnesses, which go unnoticed every year.

In their place, more than 30,000 children, some as young as 10, have been "recruited" into smoking the past two years.

This is all because of our lackadaisical attitude and pathetic pace in asserting our responsibility against the merchants of death!

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