

Ban or no, let's keep a lid on the other 'silent killer'

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

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The ban, albeit a limited one, seems to be on after all. This followed the Health Ministry's change of heart on an earlier proposal to ban advertising related to fast food in general.

In the words of the Health Minister: "The time has come."

Of concern is the increasing number of Malaysians with chronic lifestyle-related diseases.

Among the 26 million citizens, one in three aged 30 and above is said to suffer from high-blood pressure. One in four is overweight or obese.

One in 10 has diabetes, while about one in 15 has high cholesterol. Significantly, the percentage of obese Malaysians doubled what it was a decade ago. Aply, Malaysia has earned the dubious honour of being the "fattest" Asian nation.

At the end of last month, no less than Prince Charles propose a similar suggestion. On a visit to the Imperial College London Diabetes Center in Abu Dhabi for the lunch of public health campaign, he said the banning of a popular US fast food chain outlet was crucial to improve people's diets (CNN, Feb 28).



[Prince Charles, during a visit to the Imperial College London Diabetes Centre in Abu Dhabi to launch a public health campaign, suggests banning a popular American fast food chain to improve people's diets.](#)

The report ranked the United Arab Emirates as having the world's second highest number of diabetes cases.

Based on experience gathered over the many years, to ban any product that is backed by multinational giants is easier said than done. Not only because fast food transactions amount to millions of ringgit annually across a variety of media, but also because it has a much wider customer base compared with tobacco users.

In fact, while millions of Malaysians can vouch that they have never smoked, this is not so when it comes to fast food. A survey between January and December 2006 found that 43 per cent had visited fast food outlets in the preceding month (NST, Feb 24).

The major difference is, of course, that fast food is nowhere as toxic or addictive as that of the tobacco-related product.

Although people are known to be addicted to eating, it is not confined to fast food per se and the number is far too small, relatively speaking.

The suggested ban is said to also cover endorsements of events linked to fast food - the silent killer. While it sounds impressive to lump burgers and fries with cigarettes and liquor, at the end the day, we may have to eat our words if we are not careful.

After all, if it is a matter of poor eating habits, why target just one "type" of food. Many of the not-so-fast food can be "silent killers", too.

The crux of the issue is: Can a ban on fast food advertisements redress the obesity problem? No, if we go by the years of ban on tobacco advertisements. The impact remains unclear.

When it comes to promoting good health, we need to go beyond just a ban. Never mind if it is the (mis)use of beta-agonists or slimming pills, or the sale of junk food in and around schools. In all these examples, our experience has been far from satisfactory. So why bother with another ban, only to see it failing dismally?

Perhaps, we should be less ambitious and more focused. Begin by regulating the harmful "substance" associated with most chronic diseases. Foremost is the obesity-linked and artery-clogging trans fats used not only in fast food outlets but many restaurants and bakeries.

A widely-used form of trans fats is hydrogenated vegetable oil popular for frying and also in preparing biscuits, pizza dough, crackers and chips.

Experts consider trans fats to be more harmful than saturated fats. In fact, countries such as Denmark have done away with trans fats since 2003 by making it illegal for any food to contain more than two per cent trans fats.

One study last year comparing a serving of a branded large fries and chicken nuggets sold in Denmark with that in New York City found only 0.33 grammes of trans fats in the Danish case but a whopping 10.2 grammes in the US example.

Health statistics from the Danish Health Ministry for last year indicate the rate of heart disease has fallen by 20 per cent between 2001, that is two years before the trans fats ban, and last year.

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