

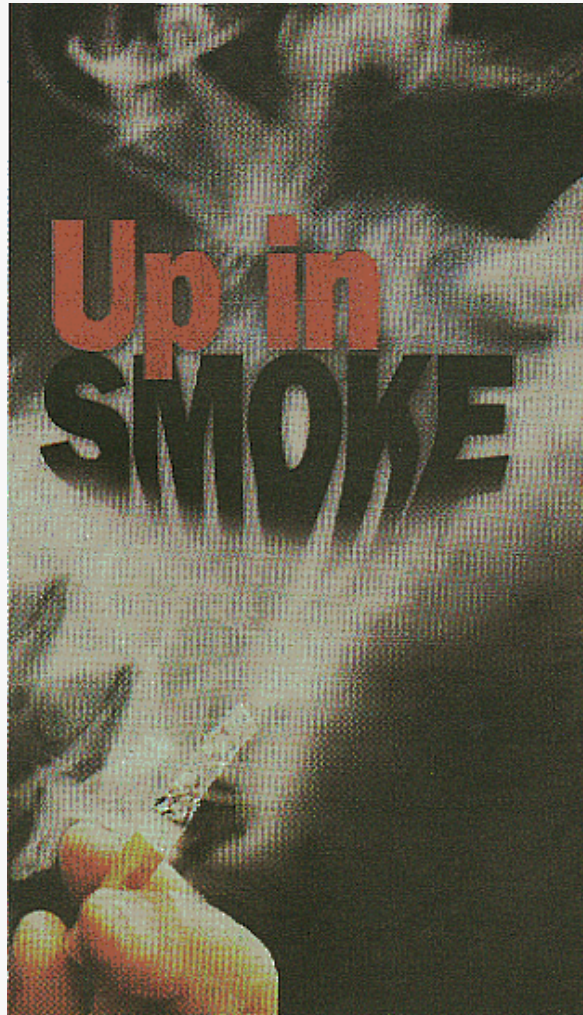
Up in smoke

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Article

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When the tobacco industry supports any anti-smoking plans, it just means it knows they won't work.



IF only problems could be solved by the signing of international conventions and protocols, the future of the globe would be much assured to say the least.

But unfortunately, this is not the case. The onus of translating the conventions and protocols into action and reality lies very much with the signatories.

Such is the case when the former Health Minister signed the World Health Organisation-sponsored Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in New York two years ago.

It gave so much hope then that Malaysia had finally decided to wage a serious war against tobacco which has been killing its citizens by the tens of thousands annually.

The *Tak Nak* campaign was launched in a grand way with an allocation of RM20 million per year for five years. There were a series of tough talks on how to curb smoking among youths in particular and a warning not to make Malaysia the hub of tobacco activities.

Various new initiatives were mooted to promote a tobacco-free healthy life-style. In particular was a suggestion to ban the sale of "kiddie pack" of cigarettes.

But over time, the plans fizzled out in favour of the tobacco industry.

And with the official declaration that the *Tak Nak* campaign is a failure, it now looks like our tobacco control policy is in tatters.

The hardest blow was the decision to defer the banning of the "kiddie packs" for five years until 2010. This

move seems to be most generous to the tobacco industry.

The reason given for this borders on economy, rather than health or the loss of lives (10,000 Malaysians die each year according to the Health Ministry).

So the lesson learnt: What we sign and what we do after that are two different things; they can be diametrically opposite.

In short, unless we are prepared to learn from this bitter lesson, the signing of similar documents means very little, apart from being a public relations exercise.

Some would label this hypocritical. One hates to say this in view of the fact that the Prime Minister has just ratified the same WHO instrument last week.

He, after all, has been consistent in voicing out his stand against tobacco.

Moreover, the FCTC is the first of its kind binding the international community to collectively act under the Tobacco Free Initiatives of WHO, including taking serious legal action against the tobacco industry.

The adoption of the convention will provide opportunities to set not only new rules for tobacco companies but also to renew commitments in enforcing them on the part of the Government.

The opportunities are there but many would be sceptical.

This is especially so because early signs show that nothing drastic will take place after the adoption of the FCTC.

The reason is rather simple albeit ironical — the country's biggest tobacco company has already announced full support for the Government's move to ratify FCTC (NST, Sept. 17).

The tobacco spokesperson reportedly said that the company wished to help deliver tobacco regulations that could help reduce the impact of tobacco on public health.

The irony is here: The last time the industry articulated the same sentiments, nothing happened. In fact, the number of smokers went up.

To the tobacco control advocates, it is no more than a smoke screen based on what is called the "scream test".

The rule of thumb is that if the tobacco industry willingly supports any action against it (that is, if it does not scream), chances are the so-called action is bound to be ineffective.

Otherwise why should the industry want to support it?

A good example to illustrate this is the ban on sale of cigarettes to those aged below 18 announced some years ago.

It would be interesting to find out how many youths below 18 or the vendors involved have been fined or taken to court.

Similarly, when the *Tak Nak* campaign was launched, the industry supported it giving the same reason — to reduce the number of youths smoking.

On the contrary, tobacco control advocates were much more cautious. Despite the support from the industry, the number of youths smoking continues to rise.

Meanwhile, the tobacco companies continue to reap valuable mileage as good corporate citizens.

The fact remains that the industry knows exactly what works and what does not.

Assuming that the industry really wants to help as it claims, why then did it agree to defer the ban of the "kiddie packs"?

Why didn't it voluntarily implement the suggested ban?

The implication: We have to sacrifice about 50,000 lives on the altar of the industry, before the ban can take effect in 2010, if at all it is to be implemented.

What would really hurt and make the industry "scream" is increasing taxes on tobacco, going by the experience of other countries serious about protecting the health of their citizens.

Given that the price of cigarettes in Malaysia is still among the lowest in the region, it certainly makes sense to hike prices of cigarettes.

And the opportunity to do that is just around the corner — at the coming Budget.

Despite what the industry says about higher prices resulting in more smuggling, higher taxes will result in fewer smokers, thus fewer deaths and diseases related to smoking. This will reduce expenditure in treating tobacco-induced illnesses.

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