

No smoke, no need to destroy 'ketum' tree

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RECENTLY there was this call, again, to look for a new way of dealing with the problem of drug abuse in the country.

It looks like we are caught at a crossroad as a result of our own doing.

Fortunately, the Ministry of Internal Security (*Malay Mail*, April 14) "is willing to consider the proposal to provide drugs to addicts as part of its effort to fight drug addiction in the country".

The ministry's Parliamentary Secretary was quoted as saying that "the idea of supplying drugs could be traced back in history, when opium shops were licensed to supply the drug to addicts".

This is in tandem with an observation made by an MP "that the mandatory death sentence on drug traffickers has not been effective in curbing the problem".

Thus it follows: It is better to give them (addicts) drugs and let them live their lives the way they want?

Perhaps, out of a feeling of exasperation, he went too far in suggesting that they could be placed on a remote island to facilitate monitoring.

Regardless, many find the idea of legally supplying drugs as outrageous. This is understandable, after all the war on drug addiction has been on for at least one generation now.

To do so is almost like admitting that we all have failed, despite drugs of abuse having been renamed *dadah*, labelled as *haram*, *nqjis*, and likened to a ghost to incite "fear".

The nation has even mandated capital punishment at the risk of being called barbaric and uncivilised.

Yet we seem determined to soldier on. Clubs and NGOs (notably, Pemadam mushroomed to support the war against drugs.

The drug addiction phenomenon is so captivating that the clubs and NGOs have taken a life of their own — some as a social platform, others a political one.

So when someone says "let us supply the addicts with drugs", it is not surprising to hear so many knee-jerk reactions, from most quarters.

But is it such a new idea? Let's ponder for a while, because in essence the idea has been executed for such a long time, even before the opium shops of the colonial days.

Deadly drugs of addiction has been lucratively supplied to millions of addicts in Malaysia for as long as one can remember.

Think tobacco, the gateway drug, another declared enemy of the nation.

Thanks to our own policy indecisiveness and delays for the umpteenth time (the latest is the postponement of sailing cigarettes in small packs), the addiction problem ballooned as the supply network widens and the number of addicts and deaths multiplies.

There is little difference in how tobacco and drugs are supplied, except that the latter is done clandestinely, while the former openly and glamorously peddled.

Nevertheless, the objective is the same: to develop a consistent supply line that continuously feeds the addicts with their drug of choice, on demand.

So nothing is exactly new or outrageous as such.

This argument is further supported by the fact that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has long reclassified tobacco as an addictive drug that could result in "tobacco dependence".

The terminology used to describe the tobacco phenomenon is similar to any situation relating to drug dependency.

In addition, like drugs, WHO admits that tobacco kills, as reaffirmed by one of the slogans for the World No-Tobacco Day recently: "Don't be duped, tobacco kills."

The number of tobacco-related death annually is said to be equivalent of a jumbo jet crashing every day in a year with no survivors.

While under ordinary circumstances, there will be a lot of hue and cry if just one jet crashes, hardly any thought is given to tobacco-related deaths.

Why is it so is really mind boggling, especially since at the scientific level there are many similarities putting tobacco in the class of drugs.

For example, the addiction caused by tobacco is no different from that of hard drugs like heroin or amphetamine-type stimulants, said to be the current problem.

Tobacco also affects the same brain parts, the same brain chemical(s) and undergoes the same basic mechanism of addiction. In fact, their addiction liability is almost similar, throwing some light as to why smokers find it difficult to quit their addiction-forming habits.

In sum, both tobacco and drugs must be wiped out at all cost.

So it begs the question why is there such a stark contradiction when we keep growing tobacco as a source of supply and sustenance for the addicted, and ban the growing of other drugs such as ganja or opium.

Or why *ketum* trees must be destroyed, putting the livelihood of some in jeopardy.

Whereas, as late as last month, reportedly the Government approved as much as RM10.5 million for tobacco growers and curers, especially in Kelantan, apparently to offset the impact of the government's successful *Tak Nak* campaign against smoking.

This move is so ridiculous, to say the least, because it means the supply line to tobacco addicts will be strengthened, again a clear example of our policy indecisiveness to stop Malaysians from smoking.

It must be obvious by now, as illustrated by tobacco — the addictive gateway drug — that the suggestion made by the Ministry of Internal Security has its merit.

If at all it only reinforces the current mainstream practice of supplying the addicts (in this case, tobacco) with their own needs openly.

So why is it so "outrageous" if the practice is extended to other drug addicts.

On the contrary, in this way, Peninsular Malaysia can easily claim the once famed title "Golden Chersonese", albeit for different reasons, at par with that of the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent.

And just think of the revenue too — many times that of tobacco, a seemingly important aspect usually quoted by the authorities in defence of tobacco promotion.

Thus, unless and until, there is a firm and consistent reversal of the present policy to freely supply tobacco to the Malaysia public, it is difficult to block the suggestion by the Ministry of Internal Security.

Should the present schizophrenic policies on drug control remain unchanged, our votes must go to the Ministry's bold initiatives so that the country's internal security will not be compromised due to rampant drug addiction, regardless of drug type.

After all, invariably all drug addicts start off as tobacco addicts, especially at a very young age.

That's the root of our drug problem.

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