

Nailing the tobacco coffin

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If there ever was doubt about the Government's commitment to cut down smoking, it should be laid to rest now.

The 2005 Budget has hammered the last few nails into the tobacco coffin; an increase of about 40 per cent in excise duties.

It pushed the price per 1,000 cigarettes from RM58 to RM81, and price of a pack of 20 sticks by more than RM1.

IF this is not convincing, a few days later the Prime Minister again reminded Malaysians not to smoke, when launching the National Fitness Council.

"For those who are smoking, stop it, and those who intend to take up the habit, my advice is, don't." You cannot be more direct than that.

The anti-smoking *Tak Nak* campaign depicts how dangerous a puff is, showing in knocking detail how cigarette smoke enters the lungs and make them cancerous, and the clot that it induces in the brain.

"There can be more, of course: grim pictures, showing impotency, heart attacks, blocked blood vessels, and premature babies. There would really drive home the anti-smoking messages that have thus far been vague and abstract.

Price increases have been recognised by the World Health Organisation as an effective strategy in tobacco control. But the tobacco industry has always tried to confuse the public about the impact of such a move, in fact, against anything that WHO tries to do to curb smoking.

It is important to understand the tobacco industry's practices to ensure the success of any tobacco control policy. WHO has brought to attention the campaigns launched by the industry such as promoting themselves as good guys who create jobs, help farmers and fuel national economies, promote the quality of sports, leisure and cultural activities, and protecting the environment.

One of the favourite spins used by the industry is of course, the hype about so-called illicit cigarettes.

But the stark truth is more blatant. It has been amply shown that the tobacco in the same illegal trade, as suggested by court cases brought by Canada, the European Union and others.

And according to the director-general of Customs, cigarette sales have shot up "between 20 and 30 per cent" since the newly-introduced security band (banderol) came into effect on Aug 1.

Malaysia can afford to impose higher cigarette increase before any dent can be felt by the industry, we must consider this for the next Budget, now that the Government has shown strong political will.

In this way we can aim for excellence, glory and distinction without any distraction from the merchants of death.

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