

Toxic pesticide in cigarettes

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THE RECENT ADMISSION BY LIGGET Group Inc. in the United States confirmed the long-held suspicion that cigarettes contain a potpourri of hazardous substances.

In an unprecedented move, Ligget reached a pact with more than 20 states in the United States which are currently suing the tobacco industry to recoup medical funds spent in treating smoking-related illnesses (such expenditure could amount to an estimated US\$600 million a year). This was a landmark event, because for the first time, the true anatomy of the tobacco industry was exposed to the public.

Ligget broke ranks with the rest of the tobacco industry by making available "a treasure-trove of potentially incriminating documents that the state and local governments will rely on in the city and county lawsuits" against other tobacco companies.

Such a part can give access to crucial internal documents that will be vital in the suits. The Ligget documents are important because it has numerous implications on the public at large. Moreover, as remarked by law professor John Banzhaf, executive director of the United States Action Smoking and Health, "the fact that the company admits that smoking caused diseases and that nicotine is addictive is a lot more forceful than testimonies by scientists."

As expected, more sordid stories are gradually being unravelled from this new development. The information from Ligget's internal documents mentioned a variety of toxic substances found in cigarettes, ranging from pesticides to fertilisers. Some of these substances are so harmful that their use is banned in several countries.

Consequently, many anti-tobacco lawmakers are pressing tobacco companies to disclose all the ingredients in cigarettes. They want tobacco companies to list the ingredients with inserts in each pack of cigarettes, cigars, pipe and smokeless tobacco so that smokers are fully informed of what they are subjecting themselves to. Some also want bigger and starker warning labels printed on more mundane-looking packs.

Last year, the state of Massachusetts became the first to require tobacco companies to make known the additives in their products covering cigarettes, snuff and chewing tobacco, apart from the nicotine and tar levels in them.

More specifically, documents turned over by the company showed that the company also knew cigarettes being sold in the market contained residues of toxic pesticides. These include DDT, malathion and endrin, which the Ligget documents label "highly toxic." Moreover, according to one source, while the United States Federal guidelines say that products for human consumption could contain only one part per million (ppm) of the insecticide, cigarettes tested showed 55 times more in the tobacco and 10 times more in the smoke. Yet these cigarettes still went on sale to the public.

It is important to note that substances such as endrin and DDT are banned by many governments because of their toxicity. These are only a few examples. Other poisonous substances such as arsenic and toxaphene are also listed in the Ligget document.

Notwithstanding these, there are also about 600 additives and more than 40 types of carcinogens in cigarettes. Tobacco companies are also known to have a range of about 1,000 flavouring agents at their disposal.

Given the mixed bag of chemicals packed in a cigarette barely 15cm long and less than 2 cm in diameter, it is not surprising that at one point, Ligget was considering using synthetic ingredients to increase the impact of cigarettes on smokers, "without the severe toxicity itself." Other makers are more creative in this respect by producing so-called "all natural cigarettes." The maker promoted it as having none of the other 559 additives and it was for the "purists and those who try to be at one with the Earth," despite the well-known fact that the cigarettes still contain tar and nicotine.

It falsely claims that it is only when all the chemicals are being added to regular cigarettes that the ill health effects are associated with smoking, conveniently dismissing the hazards of the tar and nicotine as part of the natural ingredients. In any case, all these subtle manoeuvres are indications of the strong "guilt-complex" that surrounds the tobacco industry. Unfortunately, this complex is not strong enough for them to reveal the true nature of the dangers implicit in their cigarettes until they are forced to by law.

Overall, the number of substances associated with a cigarette could be in the range of thousands. This is too many well be an underestimation considering the fact the very tip of a lighted cigarette is a glowing furnace of more than 1,000 degree celcius. Under such extreme and severe temperature, what is actually being produced when any one of these chemicals are being heated is anyone's guess.

It is therefore no wonder that the Health Department of Western Australia mentioned that one could inhale up to 4,000 chemicals from a cigarette.

With all this new evidence coming clearly to focus, it is inconceivable that in this day and age, such a harmful product is still allowed to be sold freely to the general public, almost without any impediment at all.

Sadly, many Third World countries remain oblivious to such an unprecedented turn of events. In Malaysia, it is "business as usual" despite the massive flow of new information questioning not only the integrity of the tobacco products freely sold, but also the manufacturers of such dubious items.

Unlike in the United States where public attitudes towards tobacco have become increasingly negative, concerned citizens in this country are still fighting an uphill battle with tobacco lobbyists and at times, politicians. While the Americans are calling on the Congress "to investigate the lies of the tobacco industry" in the wake of the recent events, the industry locally is still justifying its magnanimous existence as a big contributor to the economic well-being of the country.

As a result of this new awareness, many claim that despite the accessibility to some updated information on the hazards of smoking the tobacco industry takes no comprehensive steps to remedy the precarious situation, nor does it attempt to fully inform its customers about it.

On the contrary, for decades, tobacco executives have been claiming that cigarettes, are not as harmful as they are made out to be. They go on with advertising and sponsorships, minimising, if not totally ignoring, the seriousness of ill health and addiction brought about by smoking.

Ironically enough, in the wake of the Liggett confession, lawyers for tobacco companies continue to exhort that the documents are secret and challenge their relevance of making them public. Unfortunately, this works well in a relatively docile society like Malaysia, where opinions about the dangers of smoking remain fragmented and the strategy to combat them fragile. Unlike its counterparts in the West, the local tobacco industry seems "protected" from any impending lawsuits brought against them for the time being.

Lastly, although all these points more directly to Liggett, a very small tobacco concern, the implications to the tobacco industry as a whole are equally serious. In no way should the rest be allowed to go scot free. The average population will find it very hard to believe that-if such a small tobacco company knew among others what hazardous substances are contained in cigarette - none of the chief executive officers of the larger companies could claim innocence over the matter especially in the court of law.

To quote a Minnesota attorney general, Hubert H. Humphrey III: "This is a little like busting a street drug dealer to get the Columbian drug cartel."

All the same, before this could be done with any degree of success, we need to be united if we are serious in creating a tobacco-free world. Hence the theme of the 1997 World No-Tobacco Day - Unite for a Tobacco-free World - which will be celebrated on May 31.

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