

Tobacco-lympics: Faster, higher, stronger and even smokier...

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Article

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TOMORROW, THE ATLANTA OLYMPIC will be over. Many new world-class standards have been set in the past 2 weeks or so. In this sense Malaysia too has set a new Olympic records. Malaysians should take pride in any medals won by our athletes. If we managed only a bronze in the last Olympics, In Atlanta, at least we did better. However, while we celebrate this achievement, we cannot overlook certain things that have not changed.

Much like the previous Olympics, we have been subjected to such intense "indirect" tobacco advertisements. The difference, this time perhaps lies in the theme "Breakaway." Youngster have taken to the tune of the theme quite naturally. One wonders whether they will take that extra step to smoke the brand of cigarette implied in the advertisements.

The association between the ad and the games is of course, a positive one. It climaxed with an archer lighting the symbolic Olympic touch supported by the advertiser's logo. Talk about positive reinforcement. Moreover, there was not a single reminder during the period stating that smoking is hazardous to health or at least incomparable with sports.

The joint statement by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the World Health Organizations (WHO) and UNESCO disassociating smoking and sports (see *Healthtrack*, May 31) was not even mentioned. That the Centennial Olympics should stay away from tobacco-company sponsorship was of no significance at all.

Thus, while we won a couple of medals, we as a nation lost a golden opportunity to smoke out tobacco from sports in this country. Unlike the badminton heroes who fought hard to win medals and made us proud, we at home have not fought hard enough to make Malaysia's sporting events tobacco-free. Instead, we put ourselves in a compromising position before the world when it comes to issues of public health.

The situation is made worse by the fact that the country is facing another upsurge in drug abuse. And as confirmed by many quarters recently, we are indeed losing the war against dadah abuse.

In fact, barely a week before the Olympics, we were reminded that there was a "dramatic increase in the number of addicts."

The 1995 Dadah Report issued by the Anti-Dadah Task Force under the Prime Minister's Departement confirmed that the figures in 1995 were the highest since 1988. It shows that "the preventive measures taken were still ineffective."

When commenting on the problem of drug abuse, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Megat Junid Megat Ayob was quoted: "We want to open everybody's eyes to show that all is not well and that it is not only the government's problem but everybody's."

This is cause for concern for everyone, from baive users to powerful decision-makers. After all, dadah abuse has left in its wake more than 200,00 addicts and a rising demand for drugs.

Last year, for example, Malaysia registered 13,140 new drug addicts. In the first three months of this year, 3,518 new addicts were picked up, a rise of 38% over the same period last year. There was also a high rate of relapse among former inmates of rehabilitation centres. Last year, that figure was 20,964.

The situation is made even more alarming eith the constant threat of AIDS. Intravenous drug users (IDU) are said to make up more that 75% of the 15,471 people known to be HIV positive. It is a pervasive problem that cuts across geographical and sociocultural boundaries.

But what has all this to do with the tobacco-company sponsorship of the Olympics or any other sporting event?

Let's examine some facts. Tobacco is addictive. But "peddling" cigarettes is still allowed under the law and they are promoted under various guises. Advertising tobacco-related products thus mounts to no more than a subtle way of "pushing" an addictive product.

In fact, it is ironic that tobacco continues to enjoy widespread publicity. What's even more frightening is that a good majority of the public seems oblivious to the fact that tobacco contains and addictive substance - nicotine - and that tobacco users are invariably victims of nicotine addiction.

The mass media's occasional public education messages about the harmful effects of tobacco smoking are overshadowed by much more beguiling indirect tobacco advertising.

On several occasions, decision-makers and policy planners have been quoted as saying that tobacco-sponsored events and ads are generous sources of income. They have neglected to mention the long-term health and

social consequences of smoking.

This in way is ironic because other addictive drugs can also bring an even fatter sum of money if only they are allowed to be promoted like tobacco. Fortunately, this has not happened for obvious reasons - medical, health and social.

Why that this line of argument is not applicable to tobacco is beyond comprehension. This double standard and hypocrisy continue to be perpetuated at the expense of youth and innocence, with the world as an audience.

The implications are obvious. It must be categorically stated that tobacco used has been intimately linked in one way or another to illicit drug use. According to the World Health Organization (WHO): "The problems no longer relate to the use of only one or a few drugs. More often, users move from one drug to another and use combinations of different substances. In many societies, habit-forming exposure to tobacco, alcohol and drugs can start at a very early age, with grave consequences for health in later life."

In fact in 1990, WHO established the Programme on Substance Abuse which addresses both health and social problems with regards to the use of various forms of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, illicit drugs, indigenous plants and inhalants.

In other words, the complexities and scope of the dadah problems today require a total and comprehensive approach compared to what has been attempted before. It is imperative that we recognised this fact and act on it.

In an article published in a WHO-sponsored bulletin, *World Health*, (July-August 1995) it was mentioned: "The new concept that smoking induces nicotine dependence means that this is considered an addictive drug. This fact is gaining support from international scientific agencies. Many studies, including some which have been concealed by the tobacco industry, show that nicotine does produce chemical reactions in the body similar to those produced by heroin and cocaine."

"The relapse rates of dependent persons trying to quit using nicotine, alcohol, cocaine and heroin are roughly the same; many even report that it is harder to quit tobacco than various other illegal drugs.

In fact, a recent study by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at the Columbia University in United States confirms that nicotine is a "gateway drug" which is associated with the use of illicit substances.

According to the study, adults who started to smoke before the age of 15 are three times more likely to be regular hard drug (including "narcotics") users and more than twice as likely to be regular cocaine users than those who started smoking at 18 or older.

Children who smoke daily are 13 times more likely to use heroin than children who smoke less often. All these new findings should be seriously considered when conceptualising and developing a new, bold approach in dealing with the dadah problem.

Our efforts in the dadah war have of course been laudable. If judged by Olympic standards, we deserve no less than a gold medal.

Malaysia has always stood firm in dealing with this issue even when other countries seemed fit to label our drug laws "barbaric" at one time or another. Malaysia has repeatedly called for a global war against dadah trafficking at various international forum.

Despite these, drugs continue to plague the country and newer ones are making their entrance, Ecstasy being most example.

At the end of it all, the verdict is pronounced, and we are rudely awakened by the statement that "our dadah programme has failed." It is a harsh sentence, but rather sobering because admitting our own failures will give us a new lease of life in battling with the problem. Much like addicts themselves, recognising and admitting the problem forms part of the long-term solution.

In short we clearly need to rethink our new strategies in the continued fight against dadah. We need to include tobacco and alcohol in the category of substances of abuse. This is important in order to avoid the pitfalls of the yesteryears.

The problem of tobacco-addiction can no longer be glossed over if Malaysia is serious in meeting its own vision by the year 2020. In fact it has been estimated that by the 2020, of the 10 million global annual tobacco death toll, about 7 million deaths will involve population of the developing countries, including Malaysia; while millions more will pick up the addictive habits. This decreases our chance in winning the dadah war, making it a near impossible task.

Indeed, what better way to start than by dissociating tobacco from all activities associated with sports and the arts. In this sense it is very heartening to note that all the Rakan Muda programmes so far, including the recent Sukma Games, are being sponsored by non-tobacco related companies.

These are good models that should be expanded upon in earnestly promoting sports and arts in this country.

As we look forwards to the 27th Olympiad in Sydney at the turn of the century, we may need to cast our mind back to the winning strategy used in Atlanta - a combination of self-confidence, determination, national pride, teamwork and of course the courage to succeed.

Above all, we need to begin today.

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