

moking out tobacco use from sports

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Yesterday, May 31, was the 1996 World No-Tobacco Day. It is a day for all individuals, communities and nations to take stock of what is happening around them as far as tobacco use, especially cigarette smoking, is concerned.

This time around, the theme is "Sports and Arts without Tobacco." The World No-Tobacco Day was initiated by the World Health Organization (WHO) to look into the progress made by each member state in the attempt to eliminate smoking habits among their population. This is perhaps the only day in the year that the tobacco issue is widely addressed.

For Malaysia, being a member of WHO, this event has special significance and this was demonstrated last year when the government promulgated and implemented a series of measures to curb the spread of smoking among Malaysians, especially in the young. The Ministry of Health in particular, has been the prime mover in such efforts.

But like any other campaigns to promote and create health, the responsibility of ensuring success in such campaigns does not rest solely on the Ministry of Health alone, or any one single agency for that matter. Like the battle against dadah abuse, the fight against tobacco use face many problems.

There are a number of 'push-and-pull' factors that make cigarette smoking-related problems multi-dimensional. This then makes a concerted effort involving all sectors imperative. In fact, cigarette smoking is becoming very closely related to a form of dadah abuse, as more scientific reports produced these days implicated tobacco as an addictive substance.

The tobacco industry itself is beginning to admit this fact although this has long been known to them (as evident from reports of confidential documents and internal memos that were smuggled out by ex-employees of tobacco companies). But they continued to mass market cigarettes, perhaps knowing well that the addictive properties in cigarettes could be used to their advantage.

As a consequent, there are now several lawsuits where tobacco companies are being sued by smokers, some of them made on behalf of their loved ones, friends and next of kins. This is allowed by several states in the United States because tobacco companies have purportedly failed to warn their clients that cigarette smoking is habit-forming and addictive.

This development should provide an entirely new direction to the debate on smoking especially for Malaysia, which has been very tough in its fight against dadah abuse. Still, we seem to be largely unconvinced of the ever increasing dangers associated with smoking.

To this day, tobacco remains a special category of legal drugs that can be abused regularly and openly everyday by millions of Malaysians. Worse, we are constantly reminded of it through the mass media, either blatantly (printed media) or subtly (television commercials). Themed "Sport and Arts without Tobacco," this year's World No-Tobacco Day focuses on the incompatibility between sports and tobacco. This is important because as far as "indirect" tobacco advertising in Malaysia is concerned, sports in Malaysia is very much "greased" by tobacco companies. Thus, in the spirit of the World No-Tobacco, we must now look into the issue right in the eye.

Being the host of the 1998 Commonwealth Games, we cannot afford to promote sports and cigarette smoking simultaneously and expect to be taken seriously on the issue of health policies. We need to state clearly our commitment against the involvement of tobacco in sports (and arts) to all participating nations and not least to our athletes as they develop their talents in the various sporting events. It is also crucial to show this commitment because the International Olympic Council (IOC) cosponsored the 1996 World No-Tobacco Day with two other international bodies, UNESCO and WHO.

The joint involvement of these august bodies - each in its own area of expertise working towards the well-being of mankind and friendship through sports, culture and health - in co-sponsoring this day is an indication of the seriousness of the problems involving tobacco and the bodies' commitment to curb smoking.

In a joint declaration, they stated that "the 1996 World No-Tobacco Day gives us a special opportunity to join forces and remind the world that physical and mental well-being is of utmost importance to all of us."

Malaysia should no longer hesitate to support such declaration. We owe this to the nation because good health cannot be taken for granted. It depends on the active involvement of individuals and communities, particularly so in the fight against smoking (or in any other health campaigns for that matter).

The lack of commitment from all parties seems to be the Achilles heel in many of our efforts to discourage smoking in Malaysia. Different sectors appear to view the entire exercise with varying degree of importance and priority. There is almost an absence of any national strategy when it comes to tobacco use. We read and

hear about contradicting statements regarding the direction we are heading in the attempt to stem out smoking among youth and school children.

This impression is further enhanced by a series of press reports regarding the sponsorship of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic television coverage by a tobacco company. Our television network look set to be a launching pad for another form of intense "indirect" tobacco advertising.

The 1996 Olympics should have been used to demonstrate that sports can be completely tobacco-free. Regrettably, we are not all that keen to bring this crucial message across. It is bed enough that certain sports in this country laced with tobacco advertising - soccer, badminton, sepak takraw. Intentionally or otherwise, we have sent a signal to the whole world of our hypocrisy in dealing with the tobacco issue, in stark contradictions with the international sporting principles and norms.

This confusing state of affairs is rather unfortunate because tobacco has now come under very stringent scrutiny by many world bodies and organisations. In this context, a statement made by the Minister of Health to do away with "indirect" tobacco advertisements is timely and appropriate.

In Malaysia, "indirect" advertising involving tobacco clearly predominates in the areas of sports and arts. Almost without fail, advertisements about sports and arts (e.g. concerts, award ceremonies, etc) aired over our television are backed by the tobacco industry.

As though that is not enough, at almost every moment of the air-time this 'indirect' advertisements seems to continue. This is typical for any 'indirect' advertisements, in fact this is where the catch is. Viewers are subliminally seduced to whatever that needs to be promoted - not just the products, but more importantly the images and perceptions, including 'dreams', no matter how false they are. In one recent study in the United States, there were almost 6,000 sightings or mentions of tobacco company names during a 90-minute broadcast of a major motor racing event - a rate of more than once per second. These are in turn broadcasted to millions.

In Malaysia, not only will there be advertisement stands and billboards strategically positioned around the the sporting arena, the sportsmen themselves will be wearing jerseys prominently highlighting the name of a particular cigarette brand, sometimes even both teams displaying the same brand.

A good example is our local football league which is being advertised as "Brand X Premiere League" (with "Brand X" in bigger and prominent prints, of course). In addition, the corporate colours and logo of Brand X are also displayed on the props and settings of the studio and even the jackets worn by sports commentators.

Compare this with the truly professional 'UEFA Euro '96' - at no time where the jerseys of the players sponsored by a tobacco company. The 1994 World Cup was tobacco-free. But as usual, when telecast here, the coverage was sponsored by a tobacco company. Some local sporting events even have their cheerleaders "choreographed" by a tobacco company.

Here are some relevant quotes from the co-sponsors of this year's World No-Tobacco Day: "Sponsorship is believed to be an effective way of improving the tobacco industry's image. A positive association is created between arts, sports and cigarette smoking. Consumers, especially young people, are encouraged to associate smoking with high level sports, art and cultural achievements. And so, *smoking continues to be promoted as positive social behaviour and another generation of new smokers is recruited.* And the very lives that sports and arts are supposed to enhance are hindered by the use of this hazardous substance.

"For a relatively minor donation to culture, tobacco companies buy their way into the advertising market, where they spend million of dollars ensuring that the public remains familiar with the colours, logos and images of their brands. Studies confirm that the small fraction of money that may be received from tobacco companies for sponsorship of sports and arts contrasts strongly with the *societal costs that result from tobacco-induced diseases.*

It may well be said that we have enough controls such as the advertising codes and guidelines which should strictly adhered to. But the reality is that there are many loopholes which can be used to promote tobacco products.

A case in point is a series of advertisements (over television, glossy magazines and mega billboards) that deceptively looks like a collection of "things" (in this case a helicopter, spotlights, people carrying red banners), which at a distance turn out to be an exact replica of a gilded cigarette box, three-dimensionally focused and well-directed to the naked eye.

Of course, the cigarette brand name implicitly appears in our minds. Sometimes it is so "indirect" that it borders on being "deceptive". How can such advertisements continue to be strategically posted and distributed throughout the country and yet escape the watchful eye of the law?

The crux of the issue is not only the question of the advertisements being "indirect" per se, but the fact that they are so cleverly designed to act as a sharp and penetrating tobacco marketing tool. In other words, like all business transactions the tobacco companies have calculated their investments well regardless of any restrictions place upon them. They are certain to come out as winners, all at the expense of our people, the impressionable youth in particular.

The ultimate question that begs to be answered is: whose interests are we serving? Are we justified to exploit the innocence of our youth, knowing that tobacco-caused disease result from a business that while lucrative, is extremely detrimental to our society as a whole? If not, shouldn't we take tougher action (as outlined by the World No-Tobacco Day) against the involvement of tobacco companies in sports and arts?

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