

Smoking - Self-inflicted poisoning

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Tomorrow, May 31, 1995, is World No-Tobacco Day.

The objective of this event is to convince all who use tobacco to quit for at least 24 hours. Hopefully, this will lead to a more permanent commitment to stop smoking. The World No-Tobacco Day is also intended to encourage governments, communities, groups, and persons worldwide to become aware of the hazards of tobacco use.

The World Health Organization estimates that during the 1990s, approximately 3 million people will die each year as a direct result of smoking-related illnesses, and about one third of these deaths will occur in developing countries like Malaysia.

By comparison, such figures dwarf the number of deaths attributable to all other known pollutants, including those in the air, the water and the food supply. It most clearly underscores the poisonous nature of cigarette smoking.

In Malaysia, the promulgation of the Control of Tobacco Products Regulation in 1993 ends the long standing debate as to whether we should go on condoning the unrestricted use of tobacco in public places.

In fact, such a move, though deemed drastic to the civil libertarians, has been a worldwide phenomenon since the 1980s where restrictions on smoking in public places became common throughout the world.

Today, in at least 30 countries, smoke-free service has been implemented on domestic airline flights, and in more than 70 countries, buses and trains are completely smoke-free or have smoke-free areas. Others have restricted smoking in health-care facilities and even schools. All these are now familiar to Malaysians too.

They are aimed at providing protection against the exposure to Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS). ETS in the United States may cause more than 50,000 deaths among nonsmokers annually due to lung cancer, cardiovascular disease and other related conditions. At the same time, such moves can begin to create a new generation of non-smokers by curbing easy access tobacco products to youngsters.

The dangers of cigarette smoking is well known (Megazine, April 13, 1995). Scarcely a month goes by without a new study somewhere in the world uncovering more ways in which cigarettes harm health. Of late for example, cigarette smoking has also been recognised as a form of drug addiction.

Its addictive properties have been likened to that of cocaine. This is why millions of smokers find it rather difficult to quit the habit.

In the body, nicotine can mimic the effect of a naturally occurring neurotransmitter by binding to specific sites found in the nervous system, including the brain. It can produce powerful, recognisable changes in the brain - changes characteristic of addictive drugs.

In non-toxic doses, nicotine can cause constriction of the peripheral blood vessels, accelerated heartbeat and elevated blood pressure.

For someone unused to smoking, nicotine, even in small doses, can alter the heart rate and cause nausea and vomiting. Toxic levels of nicotine can cause nausea, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, profuse sweating, flushing, dizziness, hearing and vision disturbances.

It can also result in confusion, weakness, palpitation, abnormally low blood pressure and occasionally death. This more often occurs in children who accidentally ingested cigarettes. Indeed it is possible to make effective poisons to kill insects (like aphids, green flies and spider mites as well as caterpillars) from cigarettes because of the nicotine they contain.

Apart from nicotine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States was quoted to have reported that manufacturers use some 700 different chemical additives in their products.

In fact, manufacturers have some 1,000 different tobacco flavourings to choose from. But, because these substances are considered as trade secrets by the tobacco industry, their identity have never been publicly revealed.

Recently however, in the attempt to allay fears, a combined list of 599 additives have been published by a group of the six largest cigarette makers in the United States. Included in the list are the following: extracts of anise, cinnamon, molasses, dandelion roots and walnut hulls; juices from apples, raisins, figs, and plums; black currant buds; peppery capsicum oleoresin; clover tops; nutmeg powder- vinegar; caraway, carrots, dill seeds, ginger, lavender, lemon, lime, pepper, Scotch pine, oak chips, and patchouli.

The list also includes butter, chocolate, caffeine, coffee, tea, cocoa, honey, rum, sherry, cognac oil and yeast. Although most of the compounds mentioned are considered "generally recognised as safe" (GRAS), the sheer numbers, and the possibility of interactions that could take place with each other, especially after being ignited and smoked, makes it rather difficult to vow as to how safe cigarette smoking actually is.

Until today, such issues have not been well researched. As one CDC director said, "We do not know what potentially harmful by-products may be produced when these approved additives are burned alone or in combination, as they are in cigarettes." This again depends on the quantity and frequency of tobacco used.

And even assuming they are all safe, there are still other substances that raise serious doubts. Last year, *Science News* (May 21 issue) cited that the US House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment was shown a list of substances added to tobacco in cigarettes which includes "heavy metals, active agents, pesticides, and insecticides." The sources further alleged that some of the ingredients added are so toxic that they cannot legally be dumped into a landfill - no matter how small the quantity.

One chemical identified recently is methoprene, a pesticide used to kill insects. Another chemical identified is sclareol, which is quoted as a substance that can cause convulsions when it interacts with other chemicals. These are but only two of 13 ingredients used in cigarettes that "are not allowed in the foods that Americans eat."

This brings up an interesting point because in Malaysia, the Control of Tobacco Products Regulation, 1993 is part of the Food Act 1983; and it is actually imperative to know whether such additives are fit for consumption by Malaysians.

The list however does not seem to end here. According to another report, some 3800 chemical substances have been found in cigarette smoke; many of these are certainly poisonous to the body.

Examples of these are tar, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, ammonia, heavy metals and many more. Some of them will be discussed in greater detail next week.

In view of these findings, smoking can rightly be regarded as an act of self-inflicted poisoning which by any measure is injurious to one's health.

Realising this, it warrants a more concerted effort on the part of everybody to make sure that such a practice be curbed and everyone is protected from such unnecessary dangers.

As a run-up to the current World No-Tobacco Day, the National Poison Centre (PRN) will be conducting a month long ANTI-SMOKING TELE-CAMPAIGN in May 1995. It is aim at creating awareness about cigarette smoking and members of the public are invited to call PRN at 04-6572924 (during office hours, except public holidays) for any queries on the subject.

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