

PRN and You

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There is no doubt that Malaysia is on course to realize its own vision, However as it progresses into the year 2020, there will be innumerable challenges that must be met. One such challenge is to avert any potential threat to human health that are posed by the rapid rate of industrialization.

Going by what is taking place today the challenges could be formidable. The various incidents that took place last month should by now gives all of us a fair idea of what to expect in the year 2020 if we continue to be oblivious of our surrounding. The fact remains that there will be more and more chemicals being used in all walks of life, some continues to be released into the environment, others no doubt are poisonous. For example, waste fumes discharged into the atmosphere not only by industries but more commonly by motor vehicles will cause atmospheric pollution. Already there was some concern expressed over the increasing level of carbon monoxide gas in cities like Kuala Lumpur. Unfortunately this is not the only poisonous gas that are present in the air. Too much of tetraethyl lead and even carbon dioxide could result in a number of ill-effects. The latter, in addition, will set up a 'greenhouse effect' causing the earth surface to warm up. What with the ozone layer diminishing the resultant impact cannot be overemphasised.

Then there are also haze and smog immersing towns, cities and even the entire nations; and endangering the health of its citizen. Such an experience is still vividly remember by to many of us.

Likewise, our water cannot remain as clear and clean if the amount of synthetic detergents used keep increasing. Invariably they will be passed into the waste water, then discharged into the rivers - be it directly by industries or otherwise from households. The rivers and streams in turn will contaminate the ocean. Interestingly enough specialists are reported to have calculated the date at which they expect the detergent content of the oceans to rise enough to make them foam (assuming at the present rate of discharge into the rivers) to be as early as the year 2020.

A more immediate danger however will be the discharge that contains substance like phenols, petroleum hydrocarbon, pesticides. Some may even be carried by the rivers into supplies of drinking water. Otherwise, aquatic life will be affected such that it can also be injurious to human health. The cyanide incident in Pangkor was a case in point (please insert picture of poisoned dead fish in Pangkor).

In future the dangers could be even worst with the increasing likelihood of wider use of nuclear energy. Here again Malaysia has a bitter experience given the incident of Bukit Merah in Ipoh.

In other words, the year 2020 can also prove to be a nightmare despite the promise of a fully developed industrialised country. This is often the case in many developed countries like the US where it has been estimated that 7 per cent of all emergency room visits are the result of toxic exposures. In 1986 more than 5500 people who died because of accidental poisonings and they are the fourth leading cause involving death due to accidental injuries in US. In all more than 13,000 death in 1986 could be attributed to poisonings. However in terms of exposure, the American Association of Poison Control Centers, estimates that more than 2.1 million human poison exposures occurred in 1989. Poison exposures are therefore a significant occurrence that cannot be neglected.

It is in this context that Pusat Racun Negara (PRN) defines its scope of activities. Like its counterpart worldwide PRN is in the business to study the risk involving poisons as we march towards progress, create awareness regarding it and at the same time seek to avert any potential dangers that it may cause. For if these are not done, man will find that he has attempted too much, and has been the architect of his own destruction.

The Pusat Racun Negara, with its vision of 'creating health,' has set its mission as-. 'to reduce the mortality, morbidity, occurrence and cost of poisoning in a manner that strives for excellence, compassion and innovation.'

How does PRN support the above mentioned mission?

This is done by making available services that can assist in reducing the risk and occurrence of poisoning, and by encouraging optimum treatment of poisoning cases by:

- providing information on poisons and advice in poisoning cases
- conducting research and documenting poisoning incidences
- coordinating and conducting poison awareness and prevention education, and
- carrying out analytical tests and interpretation of laboratory results.

Each of these is carried out by different services, namely, Drug and Poison Information Services, Research and Documentation Services, Poison Education and Prevention Services and Toxicology Laboratory Services.

The services of PRN is open to all Malaysians. The response so far is indeed very encouraging, especially in cases of exposure to poisons. For example, in the case involving toxic colour pencils, crayons and water colours PRN received more than 50 phone calls in a day. Over a period of three weeks, about 134 related calls were received from throughout Malaysia.

This is an indication that the public, in particular, needed some information especially when faced with critical situations; and PRN acts the source of reference.

In order to facilitate the delivery of such a service, PRN will be setting up a toll-free line in the near future. Eventually it will also offer a 24-hour, 7 day a week service.

Meanwhile, the people can call 04-6572924 or 04-6570099 for any information regarding poisoning (please insert PRN logo and telephone/fax number). They will attended to by professionals and in critical cases, there will be follow-up calls.

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