

Comment: Unlike road deaths, smoking kills silently

By Dzulkifli Razak

07 November, 2006

Just like road safety's Ops Sikap, the anti-smoking campaign should be intense and sustained, not like the Tak Nak effort that is carried out in fits and starts. IT only gets worse. The recent Ops Sikap, the joint police and Road Transport Department operations to help curb road accidents during the recent festive holidays, saw more accidents than last year.

During the 11th Ops Sikap mounted during the DeepaRaya holidays, 228 people died in 15,716 accidents.

During last year's DeepaRaya season, 13,661 accidents were recorded with 233 deaths.

Of the deaths this year, about 70 per cent were motorcyclists and their pillion riders, followed by car drivers and passengers, and pedestrians.

Compounding the problem this time around were drivers and riders using drugs.

The federal traffic police chief said 113 motorists, including motorcyclists and commercial bus drivers, tested positive for morphine, heroin and ganja while they were on the road during Ops Sikap XI.

While on the subject, an interesting British report appeared last week: "Dirty hands kill more than drink driving" comparing the death toll caused by the two (NST, Oct 27).

According to a British top National Health Service official, doctors and nurses who fail to wash their hands cause as much damage as drunk drivers.

In 2004, 1,168 people died due to multiple-resistant bacterial infections in England and Wales; whereas only 580 died as a result of drink driving incidents in Britain.

Sir John Oldham, a speaker at the International Society for Quality in Healthcare, suggests that not having clean wards and not washing hands is the clinical equivalent of drink driving.

It maims and kills. Clinicians who failed to do so should be treated with "equal disdain" as drink drivers, he said.

While one is not too sure if such a comparison is applicable to Malaysia, ours would better read as "Dirty lungs kill more than road accidents" — a comparison between the number of deaths caused by cigarette smoking and that caused by road accidents.

This is not to sideline one over the other, but to give some perspective on our priorities. After all, deaths caused by both are indeed preventable, but smokers seem to be worse off.

The official number of smoking-related deaths in Malaysia is at least 10,000.

This is an underestimation when considering that currently more women and children have been seduced by cigarettes.

In comparison, the number of road accidents (based on a joint study carried out by Universiti Putra Malaysia and the Road Transport Department), showed that in 2004 there were 326,817 accidents with 6,223 involving fatalities. In spite of this, the people responsible for tobacco-related deaths are not treated with "equal disdain" as those who have caused road accidents.

In fact, today there is not enough pressure on them with the absence of any sustained and consistent campaign, equivalent to Ops Sikap, to control tobacco use. Instead, the so-called anti-smoking programmes or campaigns are often fragmented and short-lived.

The last, Tak Nak, which could have been the Ops Sikap of anti-smoking, was yanked out abruptly after allegations that it was "not effective".

While Ops Sikap is not exactly effective either, going by the statistics available, the courage to stay and fight renders it some respectability, at least as a sign of uncompromising commitment.

None of this could be said about the sponsors of Tak Nak, despite the "promise" of a return with more vengeance.

In May 2005, an MCA online exclusive recorded a Health Ministry report that every six minutes, one person was hospitalised due to road accidents and claimed the rate was based on the 82,304 accident victims being admitted to hospitals nationwide.

How this stacks up against the number of people hospitalised due to smoking, including second-hand smoke, is anybody's guess.

Estimates put it as far worse, making the disparity in action even more glaring.

It is the same situation with haze, which should more accurately be labelled as poisonous, given its toxic composition.

While it can whip up public emotions, little of such display can be detected when it comes to the fumes spewing out of a lighted cigarette.

Both haze and cigarette smoke pollute and kill, but there is not much fuss kicked up against cigarette smoke, the more lethal of the two.

The irony is that while we are adamant that our neighbouring country must endorse a pact not to poison the environment again, we are quite willing to import their cancer-causing clove cigarettes, the kretek, so that the very Malaysians we want to protect can pay money to voluntarily poison themselves to death.

As though this is not absurd enough, we have no qualms housing a purpose-built smoking "gas chamber" at our air terminal at a location where tens of thousands are walking past it daily. As a result, they are forced to inhale the stale smoke-poisoned air unknowingly when the doors of the chamber open and shut.

It looks like unless the deaths from tobacco use have a high "public relations" and publicity value (like the dramatic and violent deaths seen on the roads, or being smothered by the haze), the smokers will just have to die painfully in silence.

The loss of tens of thousand of lives could be prevented annually by putting more commitment and seriousness into tobacco control activities, as amply demonstrated successfully in many countries worldwide.

For instance, New Zealand is considering banning smoking in cars because it poses a danger to the passengers, in particular children. Some states in the US have already legislated such a ban.

But this is too radical in this country which is trying helplessly to carry out a much simpler task — like relocating the smoking lounge away from the passengers' thoroughfare. Or even just to have a workable sustained anti-smoking campaign.

Meanwhile, deaths continue away from the public eye, creating a false impression that some deaths are more "valued" than others.

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