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A small, square image placeholder with a diamond icon, titled "tobacco", with a width of 92 and height of 100.

WHILE the world is preoccupied with the potential pandemic caused by the influenza A, most are oblivious to the global epidemic that is prevalent in our midst: the epidemic of tobacco.

Today is World No Tobacco Day, a day that serves to remind us that the war against smoking and the use of tobacco is far from over. In fact, for developing countries like Malaysia, the fight is still raging as an uphill battle with no clear winning strategy in sight.

The recent exercise of putting graphic images to warn users on the health hazards of smoking has not been exactly smooth. Not only was the implementation long overdue, as compared with other countries which are more serious about stamping out the habit of smoking among its people, the attempts has been met by some kind of defiance from at least one tobacco company. There seems to be deliberate attempt to scuttle it by providing specially designed sleeves that are intended for use over the graphic warning.

Such action which has been attempted before in other countries has caught our authorities off guard. They have not being proactive enough to anticipate this reaction and regulating against it.

Aptly enough this year's World No Tobacco Day theme selected by the World Health Organisation is "Tobacco Health Warnings" as called for in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

It is claimed that effective health warnings, especially those that include images, have been proven to encourage smokers to quit, and to reduce the appeal of tobacco to those who have yet to get addicted.

Many countries have taken the initiative to use graphic tobacco packaging showing the dangers of tobacco use with some degree of success because being well-informed about the hazards of smoking may result in reducing tobacco consumption.

While warnings on tobacco packages is a simple and cheap exercise to implement, we mustn't naively assume, as has been the case in Malaysia and other weak-willed countries, that tobacco companies will comply with this diligently. In fact, the converse is true.

Tobacco companies spend tens of millions of ringgit every year to recruit new users through aggressive advertising and glamorous promotional campaigns as they are literally "killing off" their regular and faithful customers.

With the current economic crisis, it should be easier to get people to quit smoking or at least not to pick up the habit. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case.

Being an addictive product, tobacco appears to have a tight grip on its users, so much so they would rather compromise on other items than to give up smoking. It is not surprising, therefore, that tobacco companies are still among the best performing companies even in difficult times, economically speaking.

Nicotine, a highly addictive substance, is the companies' effective weapon to keep the user under a tight rein and health warnings are exactly meant for those who are addicted.

Unfortunately, this is not just confined to individual smokers. Governments, too, can become addicted to the revenues derived from tobacco in terms of taxes.

A case in point is China where reportedly officials in a certain county have been told to smoke nearly a quarter million packs of locally-made cigarettes annually or risk being fined, according to the state media.

The county government in Hubei province allegedly has ordered its staff to puff their way through 230,000 packs of Hubei-produced cigarette brands a year, the Global Times reported.

To ensure that the local economy continues to receive a helping hand from the cigarette tax collected, government departments that fail to meet their targets are fined, according to the

report.

For countries like Malaysia, dragging their feet in the fight against tobacco is akin to the misguided effort of the Chinese county. In so doing, they are some kind of a accomplice to the fact that tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death, killing more than five million people every year -- more than from HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

The time has come for us to be more serious in our efforts to wipe out this poison being sold by the merchants of death. We have lost enough time which has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives of productive Malaysians.

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