

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**

After a decade, still a burning issue

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TODAY is World No Tobacco Day, an annual event where the World Health Organisation (WHO) highlights the health risks associated with tobacco use and advocates for effective policies to reduce tobacco consumption.

This year, it also calls for countries to collectively end the illicit trade of tobacco products. Such illegal products can only add to the dangers of the so-called deadly "legal" ones.

It is well known that tobacco companies have exploited loopholes in tobacco control governance systems and poor enforcement to "strategically" indulge in illicit trade of tobacco products, for example by aiding smuggling and abetting corrupt practices. And then use the chaotic situation to

argue for the lowering of taxes and plead for lesser advertising control.

Each year, the global tobacco epidemic kills nearly six million people, of whom more than 600,000 are non-smokers dying from breathing in second-hand smoke.

Unless we act, the epidemic will kill more than eight million people every year by 2030. Illicit trade will add to the numbers because youth and low-income groups in particular are much more attracted to the lower cost and affordability of these products.

WHO noted that more than 80 per cent of these preventable deaths will be among people living in low- and middle-income countries.

In many respects, the emergence of e-cigarettes in the already complex tobacco market can count as part of "illicit" trade. This is in view of the absence of a "legal" status accorded to such tobacco-based products.

While the makers and promoters of e-cigarettes claim that they are safer, many disagree until such time the products are "proven safe"

by authorities such as the US Food and Drug Administration which is "refusing" to let them into the US according to WebMD and "may soon ban their sale, as major US medical associations have asked". This applies to e-cigars and e-pipes as well.

Unfortunately, e-cigarettes are openly used and on sale in Malaysia, and little has been done to discourage the practice.

They are gaining popularity, not only for being fashionable and novel, but they also circumvent the anti-smoking campaign and control given their vague status, or otherwise welcomed as allegedly a "safer" alternative.

Even the National Poison Centre that is active in tobacco control is rather quiet about it. In countries such as Canada, the health agency has reportedly decided to ban the import or sale of e-cigarette products.

A Korean report recently revealed that "more than half of the e-cigarette products sold in the country have an actual nicotine content higher than the ratio indicated on the goods".

The situation is not unlike that of

illicit cigarettes.

The Korean Consumer Agency in a report in *The Korean Herald* (May 21) said that in its study of 25 products containing liquefied nicotine solution, "48 per cent of them showed higher nicotine content than the ratio indicated on the product". Of those, "40 per cent showed more than a 10 per cent difference between the level indicated on the goods and the actual nicotine amount".

Home Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has lamented the intractable drug abuse problem in the country, and rightly so. But the truth is that we cannot even organise an impactful anti-tobacco campaign beyond just slogans and posters.

The illicit drug scene is even more elusive. The fact that the war on drug abuse has yet to be won — after spending millions and with equivalent numbers in loss of lives — speaks volumes about the grim future ahead.

This is compounded by the fact that tobacco use is the "gateway" to hard drugs. It is a vicious cycle that needs to be broken before any significant dent can be made. The

easier bid is through tobacco products, yet we are still dragging our feet relative to our neighbours.

More than a decade after the launch of the Tak Nak campaign in 2004, can we honestly say we have achieved much or are more proactive in combating the deceitful moves of the tobacco industry?

Will the use of marijuana be decriminalised next?

Washington, Alaska and Washington DC in the US have legalised the use, sale and possession of marijuana. In Colorado, recreational use was legalised last year. In 2016, a dozen more states will hold referendums on the issue.

Most are convinced that ganja is less "evil" compared to tobacco laden with thousands of poisonous chemicals in a stick of cigarette.

The lull is over, we cannot remain negligent in protecting the future health of our younger generations.

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