

'MORE HARM THAN GOOD'

# 'More will pick up smoking if ban is lifted'

**WHILE** the tobacco industry and retailer associations continue to lobby for the reintroduction of smaller packs of cigarettes, health experts are perplexed by stakeholders wanting to even have such a discussion.

National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM) president Dr Saunthari Somasundaram says any cigarette pack that contains fewer than 20 sticks, packaged attractively, cheap and displayed prominently will attract people to pick up smoking, especially the young.

"If the industry claims that young people pick up smoking because illegal cigarettes are cheap, why then are they trying to provide smaller packs that are more affordable?"

"They (kiddie packs) are designed to reel in 'low consumption' smokers — the casual, social, women and children. Price discounts, in particular, are strongly associated with smoking uptake among students," she told the *New Straits Times*.

Dr Saunthari says there are 500,000 underage smokers in the country.

In its "Quit Smoking" programme in four schools in Klang

Valley last year, she says, NCSM found that 70 per cent of those who smoked started between 12 and 15 years old.

"These children underestimated the addictiveness of nicotine. Only 25 per cent thought it would be difficult to quit (once they start), and 50 per cent said they didn't think they would still be smoking in a year. Why do we want to tempt more children to experiment, especially with premium branded cigarettes?"

She says instead of reversing the ban, Malaysia should charge ahead in implementing its tobacco control policies.

On the tobacco industry's claim that the government would be able to recoup more tax revenue if "kiddie packs" are allowed, she says: "Any industry or association that profits from sales of tobacco have no place in helping the government determine where its tax revenue comes from."

"In fact, it (the tobacco industry) has constantly interfered with Malaysia's attempts to implement tobacco control policies, and the 'kiddie pack' is a perfect example of this."

Dr Saunthari says tobacco lob-

byists' argument is contradictory.

"If the tobacco industry wants to help the government increase its tax revenue, why has it opposed tax increases on tobacco through the years?"

"The alternative to illicit cigarettes is not 'legal' cigarettes. Cigarettes are lethal and kill 20,000 Malaysians each year. Smoking costs the global economy RM4.5 trillion a year, and is the single biggest preventable cause of death diseases.

"It results in 16 types of cancer, heart and lung diseases, and worsens diabetes as well as mental illnesses. Treating these diseases drives up the cost of healthcare, and will eventually cost the global economy RM210 trillion if nothing is done."

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Faculty of Economics and Management senior lecturer Dr Norashidah Mohamed Nor says a study by the Health Ministry and UPM on tobacco taxation last year finds that the ban on kiddie packs has reduced the consumption of cigarettes.

"When we combine both — a higher cigarette price due to

higher tax and ban on kiddie packs — the analysis showed a reduction in total consumption of cigarettes," says the lead researcher of the study titled "The relationship between tobacco taxation and demand determinants to reduce cigarettes consumption and smoking prevalence in Malaysia".

Norashidah says the study also shows that higher price of cigarettes does not influence the sale of illicit cigarettes, but factors such as corruption control, enforcement and other government efforts have a greater impact on illicit cigarettes.

Malaysian Green Lung Association co-founder and president Ho Rhu Yann says the argument that kiddie packs will tackle illicit cigarettes is "groundless and illogical".

"A 20-stick pack is sold at RM17. If 10-stick packs are introduced, the price would be RM8.50.

"Comparing a RM3 illicit 20-stick pack and a RM8.50 kiddie pack of 10 sticks, will an illicit cigarette smoker choose a more expensive kiddie pack with fewer sticks over a cheaper illicit pack with more sticks?"

Consultant psychiatrist and smoking cessation specialist Dr Amer Siddiq Amer Nordin says raising cigarette taxes and removal of kiddie packs have been effective in lowering tobacco consumption.

"To revert is to go backwards and renege on our commitment to the World Health Organisation. You don't right a wrong with another wrong. Health must come before wealth."

The Control of Tobacco Product Regulations 2004 (of the Food Act 1983) states that no cigarette pack of fewer than 20 sticks is allowed to be sold.

The regulation, backed by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Malaysia is a member since 2003), aims at reducing tobacco consumption.

Following this, the government banned packs of seven and 10 sticks in 2006, and 14-stick packs in 2010.

The Tobacco and E-cigarette Survey Among Malaysian Adolescents 2016 reveals that 14.2 per cent of adolescents are smokers; 94.3 per cent of them smoke fewer than 10 sticks per day, while 71.6 per cent buy a RM9 pack.