SOMETIMES A BIG MOUTH IS A GOOD THING.

Tanya doktor gigi anda tentang kanser mulut
Ask your dentist about oral cancer
問您的牙醫詢問关于口腔癌
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Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement: TPPA and the dangers to health

I hope it's not too late to wish everyone in the Malaysian Dental Association a belated Happy New Year. Malaysia is truly blessed as in January alone we will celebrate not one, but three celebrations: the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) birthday, Ponggal and not forgetting Chinese New Year.

In the same breath, however, is the concern with the ever-loomingly outcome for the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). The TPPA is a free trade agreement (FTA) between selected countries within the pacific-rim. A total of thirteen countries have agreed to participate in this exercise, namely Australia, New Zealand, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Peru, Chile, Canada, Mexico, Vietnam, Japan and the USA. Although the TPPA has been 'marketed' to assist in trade, like all things in life, nothing comes for free. Accordingly, the TPPA agreement will eventually allow corporations to challenge local policies through the international arbitration tribunals in case of dispute and thus limit policies within member countries. As the TPPA led by the United States mirrors other FTAs in the past, such as one between Australia and the United States, there is a possibility the situation which Australia had experienced during the implementation of plain packaging of tobacco will happen to us. In that experience, Australia, as a sovereign nation, decided to implement plain packaging as public health action to protect citizens from the dangers of smoking; a commendable move by any government. The tobacco industry, however, was unsurprisingly unimpressed and proceeded with legal action against the government of Australia, citing "international trademark and intellectual property laws infringement" using the FTA (bilateral agreement) between the two countries.

Through the TPPA, foreign investors will also have the right to sue a partner government in private offshore tribunals for introducing laws or policies which they claim would significantly damage their investments. Such lawsuits are called Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS). Over US$700 million have been paid out by governments to overseas investors in ISDS disputes brought under these agreements. The process can take years to resolve. The legal costs of these disputes alone can easily exceed US$30 million. Therefore not only do governments risk paying large amounts to foreign companies but they are then likely to be reluctant to adopt new protective policies because of the threat of another ISDS. This is called "regulatory chill", and can occur even if the legal arguments are weak. It is this concern which is driving tobacco control and other health advocates against the TPPA.

Essentially, the TPPA may allow any industry (tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceuticals etc.) to act similarly against a partnering country if threatened with such policies unless these industries were excluded from the beginning, which surprisingly, was what Malaysia had proposed recently. Taking everyone by surprise was Malaysia's stance to seek a complete 'carving out' of tobacco from the agreement. The logic is simple, ergo why should a product which kills 50% of its users when used as recommended, be provided with such benefits in a trade agreement? Hence, through a total carve out, Malaysia and partnering countries will be allowed to implement public health policies without the threat of an impending legal challenge in the future. Surely health is above trade and politics?! What use is an FTA when a significant proportion of the country's population will become ill or worse, dead! Therefore, I urge all of you to familiarise yourselves with the TPPA and how it may affect the healthcare situation in Malaysia, including on tobacco control. My hope is that you will then continue to support our tobacco control advocates through the coming year so they will be successful in this tobacco carving out process.

Tobacco's story within the TPPA is an excellent 'case study' on how public health is shaping tobacco control work internationally and to a certain extent, locally. Although commendable, more pressing concerns are the educational awareness on the dangers of smoking to all Malaysians, both
young and old, and promoting all healthcare providers as tobacco control agents. With the latter in mind, the Malaysian Association of Dental Public Health Specialists (MADPHS) together with Listerine® organized the first dentist led campaign for tobacco control with oral health as the focus. With the slogan "Smoke Free, a Healthier Mouth, Healthier You," the campaign was held at a prominent shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur on October of last year. It was launched by our Deputy Minister of Health, YB Dato' Seri Dr Hii Miin Bin Haji Yahaya. This campaign included health talks, exhibitions, free screening for oral health, and smoking and supportive treatment. This campaign was supported by many agencies, namely UM CAS, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, other learning institutions namely University Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Institute Technology Mara and Lincoln University College; and non-governmental organizations MyWATCH to press home the idea and fact that tobacco smoking is dangerous to human health, both physically and psychologically. It received overwhelming support and it is my personal hope that this event will slowly but surely highlight where dentists in Malaysia can play their part in tobacco control.

In assisting our dental colleagues to rise to the occasion when opportunity arises, up-skilling of present dentists and training of future dentists in the making is also of utmost importance, especially in terms of tobacco dependence treatment. Since 2009, the NARCC has trained nearly 400 dentists in Malaysia and conducted two symposiums. The most recent symposium was held late last year in Sabah. This one-day event hosted by University Malaysia Sabah with the help of QE Hospital in Kota Kinabalu had more than 80 attendees, where nearly a quarter were dentists. This symposium was equally divided in content between tobacco prevention which included policy development, and tobacco dependence treatment. Although tobacco dependence treatment programmes has existed for more than a decade in Malaysia, it is often least emphasized. Through the Ministry of Health, Malaysia has provided nearly 300 quit clinics throughout the whole country. A multi-disciplinary approach was taken in order to stress and reiterate that, as a nation, Malaysia will need all health care providers to be involved in tobacco control if we are to improve further in this agenda.

A number of initiatives has also been set up to disseminate knowledge at a continual pace. The Tobacco Control News, available both in physical and PDF version is now in its third issue and is targeted specifically for Malaysian healthcare providers. Many of you are likely to have received previous issues through email or through your respective agencies. For those who wish to obtain a copy, do email me personally. A recent health portal, the Malaysian Medical Gazette, http://www.mmgazette.com, was recently launched. It is a product of the Malaysian Integrated Medical Professional Association (MIMPA) and provides a number of write-ups which are free, easy to read, short and are written for public and professional alike, covering topics on various health issues, including tobacco control. I urge you to familiarise yourselves with these products, designed with your needs as busy clinicians in mind to help you stay updated with the latest happenings within the field.

Here is to wishing everyone a fruitful 2014! I sincerely hope that each of you will make it your goal to be involved with tobacco control for the betterment of the profession and all Malaysians.

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