

Change perceptions on health

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ONCE again, the Ministry of Health has shown that its idea of "public consultation" was to place two industry representatives along with a dozen doctors at a round table discussion to decide on a memorandum for a soda tax.

On top of that, the nanny state ministry seems to have taken the media into a private session to talk about banning advertising for products with high sugar, salt and fat. One has to wonder if they had invited malls to this meeting on advertising for their floor space and how it would impact their tenants.

Furthermore, there is even talk of changing the criteria for their self-regulated "Healthy Living Logo" programme, which will disqualify sweet drinks and sauces, even if they use alternative natural sweeteners like stevia.

One source said that this was the ministry's idea of "changing the taste buds" of Malaysians. Well, you might as well get the medical society to cut out all our tongues. At least then, we can still feel salt on the wounds.

There is always room for improvement when we talk about public health, but it should be done through clear, concise and proper information – not knee-jerk reactions triggered by misinformation and stigma.

Taxing sodas will not improve public health if you do not cut sugar from the teh tarik and Nescafé served at mamak stalls, which are of higher consumption. And yet again, the cause of diabetes is due to caloric intake and inactivity, not just drinking Coke and Pepsi – depending on your income grouping, if we are to believe Tony Pua.

But more so, a tax on sodas, an advertising ban on foods, and even trying to make living healthy a bland lifestyle choice go to show that the ministry is thinking more as an authoritarian rather than performing better policy in nudging people towards healthier lifestyles.

Perhaps this has more to do with them being a single silo rather than reaching out to their other ministries for assistance.

Healthy lifestyles is not just about food, but also the actions of Malaysians. Being stuck in a commute of any kind for more than an hour raises the risk of heart attacks by 3.2 times. This was a German study done in 2009.

Furthermore, those switching from driving to public transport have been found to lose an average of five pounds a year – a minuscule amount, but worthy of mention nonetheless if it means lesser congestion on highways and Prasarana not having to take out a government bond just to pay their workers' salaries.

Of course, we would first have to strap test groups with pedometers to determine the linkage between walking in urban areas and the impact on health in Malaysian cities. I would hypothesise that those living in urban areas would benefit more than suburban Malaysians.

Thus, perhaps instead of focusing too much on how Malaysians eat and changing taste buds, maybe the ministry should study more on Malaysians' inactivity and changing health habits.

Do a lot of Malaysians get stuck behind a desk with no reprieve, or do they go out walking for 10 minutes every hour? Do we even have offices with standing desks?

Do we even analyse how opening hours of shops and working hours adversely affect public health? And what about an analysis on public parks and its effects on surrounding health?

Furthermore, do they even market healthier eating options in cooking on RTM?

Instead of looking at what people put into their bodies whether rich or poor, what needs to be looked at by policymakers is to ensure that Malaysians lead healthy lives by expending what they eat, be it by providing a tax break for gym memberships, all the way up to pushing people to get on the train and start walking.

And while we are on the subject of general health, let us face some hard truths – yes, we eat a lot of sugar on top of everything because our food here in Malaysia was designed for tiffins brought to back-breaking daily work in the fields, plantations or mines.

Most of modern, urban Malaysia no longer faces such high levels of physical labour thus requiring other ways to spend that energy and they can't do it with longer hours in the office, longer commutes to and from work in a car, nor can they do it if they are stressed out of their heads, worried about income to afford healthier foods.

As such, if the ministry wants to go out to "change the taste buds of Malaysians", they are better off instead thinking about how to change their way of thinking about Malaysian and even international ideas regarding health.

This is because health is not just about what you eat, it is about lifestyles – and thus far, the only thing the ministry is doing is gearing Malaysia to becoming a nanny state rather than one that can consciously and affordably switch to a better lifestyle.

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