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The price of a puff — National Cancer Society

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JANUARY 10 — James Bond isn't the only one with a licence to kill.

Today the World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that smoking costs the global economy RM4.5 trillion a year, and will take eight million lives annually by 2030. For a species that has invented fire, travelled to space, and split the atom, but is still paying an industry to kill us, mankind is indeed strange.

Decades of research show that smoking is fatal. So in our education, advocacy and policy efforts in curbing smoking, we are often asked: if cigarettes cause such harm, why are they allowed to exist?

One challenge is the separation of the problem: the health industry sees tobacco as a health issue, but certain businesses and governments see it as an economic driver, or a business. Now, the same report by WHO states that the cost of smoking far outweighs revenues from tobacco taxes.

Smoking is the single biggest preventable cause of death and many related illnesses. Apart from resulting in lung cancer, heart diseases and emphysema, it also worsens diabetes, mental illnesses, and substance abuse.

Treating these diseases, many of which are non-communicable, drives up the cost of healthcare: if nothing is done, non-communicable diseases will cost the global economy RM210 trillion — 75 per cent of the global GDP. Smoking specifically accounts for 0.7 per cent of China's GDP, and around 1 per cent of U.S. GDP. In 2005, the Malaysian Ministry of Health spent 26 per cent of its budget on smoking related diseases, which accounted for 0.74 per cent of its GDP.

There's also the environment, productivity and human development: smoke and toxic cigarette butts pollute our air and water; smokers are 30 per cent more likely than non-smokers to miss work (and for longer periods). For some families, money spent on cigarettes is money taken away from household essentials.

No other industry causes as much damage to its users and non-users alike — and remains legal, considered a 'stakeholder', and allowed to line its pockets. Apart from cigarettes, no other consumer product kills when they are used as intended.

Instead of protecting this industry and giving it business or trade privileges, we urge the nation to support the tobacco control efforts of Malaysia. Tobacco control can work: a study in the U.S., also published this month, reports that its efforts since 1964 have resulted in eight million fewer premature smoking related deaths.

We should want the same for our fellow Malaysians.

Let us use fire, one of man's oldest discoveries, as intended: to ward off danger, rather than to light up a product that brings permanent and irreversible damage.

There's still time to stop.

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- See more at: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/what-you-think/article/the-price-of-a-puff-national-cancer-society#sthash.vMRmpbwJ.dpuf>