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Stub out stubborn 'right'

SMOKING BAN: It is to protect health and respect wishes of the majority



DR HELMY HAJA MYDIN

As an associate of a libertarian think tank, the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, it is unsurprising that one of the core principles of my philosophical belief revolves around the right of individual liberty.

However, freedom of individual choice is always married to responsibility — one should only exercise one's freedom insofar as it does not disrupt the freedom of another person.

As philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*: "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it."

Such caveats to freedom also apply to the attainment of physical and mental health, particularly when discussing the banning of smoking in public places.

The Health Ministry recently proposed gazetting eateries (including those on open-air premises and those without air-conditioning), public parks and national parks as non-smoking zones. This is in keeping with the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention for Tobacco Control, to which Malaysia is a signatory.

In protesting this move, Ho Su Mong of the Malaysia-Singapore

Coffee Shop Proprietors' General Association stated that "smokers have rights, too".

Unfortunately, it is often forgotten that most smokers are victims of nicotine addiction and, as a consequence, are not really exercising individual rights.

It is also usually forgotten that one of the main objectives in banning smoking in public areas is to protect other individuals from second-hand smoke, i.e. to ensure that the "right" of one individual does not lead to the detriment of others.

One in two smokers will die as a consequence of smoking. According to America's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2.5 million adult non-smokers have died because of second-hand smoke since 1964, the year that the seminal Surgeon General's Report linking smoking to adverse health effects was published.

Besides being a cause for the usual suspects — heart attack, stroke and lung cancer — second-hand smoke is particularly dangerous to children. Children not only suffer physical consequences, such as an increased risk of developing chest infections, but also have to bear witness to and could potentially emulate a behaviour that might lead to an untimely death.

I was fortunate to have witnessed the public smoking ban being introduced in the United Kingdom less than a decade ago. There were similar arguments of the ban being an encroachment of human rights and of restaurants going bankrupt because of falling revenue — worries that have proven to be unfounded.

Moreover, the new norm of smoke-free restaurants continues

to be welcomed by the public and, more importantly, studies have vindicated the introduction of the smoke-free policy.

A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that there were fewer hospital admissions because of asthma attacks for children below 15.

Other academicians have shown that the introduction of a smoking

ban had led to a drop in the number of heart attack patients. Another study of bar workers showed that their respiratory health had greatly improved, thanks to the reduction in exposure to second-hand smoke.

In pushing for smoke-free public areas, the Health Ministry is listening to the public. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey carried out in 2011 found that 83.5 per cent wanted 100 per cent smoke-free public areas.

The move is supported by a number of smokers, most of whom do not want to continue smoking, but are victims of their addiction. The picture is similar to that of the UK, where 82 per cent of adults supports a smoke-free legislation, including more than half of smokers.

The introduction of a smoke-free legislation will bring about unquestionable health benefits and remove the tobacco imagery from children. However, the case for smoke-free public areas continues to be hotly argued against by those with vested interests. It is for this reason I urge readers to visit www.moh.gov.my to give feedback to the government before the public consultation ends on Monday.

The writer is an associate of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs and associate professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Malaya

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Preschoolers holding up **'We are a Smoke-Free Generation'** buttons in Temerloh, Pahang. **Second-hand smoke is particularly dangerous to children**, who have an increased risk of developing chest infections.