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A smoke-free nation by 2040

Govt's Oral Health Without Cigarettes programme to help students drop smoking habit

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Dr Noormi Othman says two million lives can be saved from diseases linked to smoking by 2040 if the Generational End Game Bill is passed. PIC BY HAZREEN MOHAMAD

THE Health Ministry's anti-smoking and intervention initiative for schoolchildren called Oral Health Without Cigarettes Programme (KOTAK or Kesihatan Oral Tanpa Rokok) can help realise Malaysia's aim to be a smoke-free country by 2040.

The programme, which began in 2016 and focuses on curbing smoking habits, is a strategic cooperation between the ministry's Oral Health Programme under the Disease Control Division and the Education Ministry's Daily School Management Division.

Health Ministry principal director of oral health Dr Noormi Othman said KOTAK was an improved element and uses an incremental approach which would see oral health officers and therapists visiting schools.

"As dental inspections in schools are conducted annually, the same students will receive intervention

and the reinforcement of the message that they should not smoke.

"Our officers conduct oral examinations on pupils and students, and are also trained to identify smokers and those at high risk of doing so."

"They will provide intervention to smokers through counselling and also refer them to school counsellors.

"This ongoing programme can contribute to the shaping of a tobacco-free Malaysian generation."

Comprehensive data from 2019 showed that 18,529 primary and secondary school pupils and stu-

dents who were hooked on cigarettes quit after intervention and counselling.

"Of the 855 primary school pupils who underwent intervention, 762 or 89 per cent took a stance against lighting up. The intervention on 39,340 secondary school students saw 17,767 or 45 per cent of them giving up smoking.

"As many as 2.7 million or 99.4 per cent of primary school pupils, and 1.95 million or 97.5 per cent of secondary school students were screened in 2019.

"The screenings found that 1,240

or 0.04 per cent of primary school pupils and 63,763 or 3.4 per cent of secondary school students were smokers," said Dr Noormi, who is a dental public health specialist.

As schools were shut due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the programme was disrupted and data obtained for 2020 and last year could not be benchmarked.

Dr Noormi said the programme continuously warned of the dangers of smoking to the health of students and their loved ones, as well as provided motivation through behavioural modification so that they would not return to the habit.

The efforts include periodical visits to schools to ensure pupils are on the right path, and their non-smoking peers were strictly advised against trying out cigarettes or vapes.

Young smokers, Dr Noormi said, were drawn to cigarettes in an attempt to establish their identity and to feed their curiosity, which have lead to the prevalence of youths continuing to smoke into adulthood.

She pointed out that 2017's National Health and Morbidity Adolescent Health Survey found that 13.8 per cent of teenagers were smokers.

"Some of the causes are peer pressure, living with smokers and their environment. There are those who smoke to relieve stress, and others who were asked to buy

cigarettes for their parents felt there was no harm in smoking."

Dr Noormi lauded the government's move to push for the Generational End Game Bill, which proposes for a ban on those born in 2007 onwards from smoking, buying or owning tobacco and vaping devices.

She said it enabled the percentage of smokers to be cut down to five per cent of the entire population by 2040 from the current 21 per cent.

If the bill is passed, she said two million lives would be saved from diseases linked to smoking by 2040.

The government, she said, had been championing anti-smoking causes through initiatives such as Kempen Tak Nak Merokok, smoking-free zones, quit smoking clinics, as well as incorporating graphic warning labels on cigarette packs.

However, all the efforts were not enough to deter smoking, and the financial burden to treat ill smokers had taken a toll on government coffers.

"In 2020, the government spent RM6.2 billion to treat patients who are smokers and were plagued with lung and heart diseases.

"Meanwhile, they only managed to collect RM3 billion in taxes from tobacco products.

"The bill is a good step in the right direction to lower health risks and to protect the new generation," Dr Noormi said.

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