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RM3 billion medical bill

THE national medical bill to treat three major diseases attributed to tobacco — heart attack, lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease — comes to well above RM3 billion a year.

This tab is picked up by the government and patients who seek treatment in private hospitals.

A study on the economic cost of tobacco smoking in 2004 by the University Kebangsaan Malaysia Medical Centre showed that the bill came to RM3 billion a year.

But the experts from the centre say the health damage that tobacco wreaks today will be much more than RM3 billion, considering the rising healthcare cost, increasing number of patients and the discovery of more diseases related to smoking.

According to Health Ministry deputy director-general (Public Health) Datuk Dr Ramlee Rahmat: "The number of deaths and economic losses due to tobacco use exceeds that of the combined total of most infectious diseases including influenza, dengue, malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS."

About 10,000 people die in Malaysia each year due to tobacco attributed diseases such as cardio-vascular diseases (heart attack, strokes, and complications from gangrene due to peripheral vascular diseases); most cancers (lung, mouth, throat, oesophagus, stomach,

pancreas, liver, kidney, bladder and cervix), lung diseases (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and numerous other conditions.

Complications to common diseases such as hypertension and diabetes are made more severe with the use of tobacco products.

Most hospital admissions are of people who suffer from tobacco-related diseases.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2006 revealed that three million Malaysians were smokers and some 450,000 were aged between 13 and 18 years.

The survey showed that 46.4 per cent were adult males, 1.6 per cent adult females, 26 per cent adolescent boys and three per cent adolescent girls.

Dr Ramlee says studies show that half of lifetime smokers will succumb to diseases.

"The present burden of deaths and diseases from smoking is the result of the smoking epidemic that occurred 20 to 30 years ago.

"We expect these numbers to increase manifold in the not-too-distant future, unless the present smoking epidemic can be halted or reversed."

Dr Ramlee says tobacco control is one of the



top priorities of the ministry.

Malaysia is a party to the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and is obliged to adhere to and deliver all the provisions for tobacco control as dictated in this international legislation.

The ministry, Dr Ramlee says, has embarked on an effective strategy to educate the public, including through the "Tak Nak" campaign.

Contrary to public perception, he says, two evaluation studies, in 2005 and 2007, found that the "Tak Nak" campaign has raised public awareness about the hazards of smoking.

About 22 per cent of smokers who responded to the survey said the campaign had motivated them to quit within six months of exposure to campaign materials.

Dr Ramlee says enforcement of anti-tobacco laws has also improved significantly in recent years.

Last year, 85 per cent of the 4,329 compounds issued were paid up. Offenders paid a total of RM321,613 in compounds and RM165,895 in fines when taken to court.