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Non-smokers should be given protection

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WE support the letter "Stop these smokers who puff in restaurants" from Rangunathan Sundram (NST, Feb 14).

Cigarette smoke contains many harmful chemicals that have been established as being linked to a wide range of human ailments, including vascular, cardiac and respiratory diseases.

Today, among the first questions a doctor will ask a patient is, "Do you smoke?" This is not an idle question. It is a basic one, grounded on extensive, hard medical evidence of the hazards of smoking. Even the tobacco industry has stopped denying the health-related consequences of smoking.

Indeed, so insidious is the effect of cigarette smoke that even "passive smoke", that is smoke inhaled by non-smokers in the closed environment of smokers, is considered highly dangerous to health.

Even pregnant women who smoke, or passively inhale in the presence of smokers, run risks to their unborn babies.

In the face of mounting medical evidence, many countries, including Malaysia, have enacted anti-smoking laws. These laws are fair and reasonable.

They do not ban smoking, so smokers do not have their right to smoke abridged. But at the same time our laws recognise medical evidence and the right of non-smokers to breathe God's gift of life-sustaining clean air.

Thus, while our laws do not ban smokers from smoking to their hearts' content, it does at the same time provide for non-smokers to exercise their right to breathe unpolluted air.

Hence, the banning of smoking in enclosed public places, and provision of smoking and non-smoking sections in public areas such as restaurants.

Both restaurant owners and their smoking clients must recognise the purpose of the law, and ensure that non-smokers are protected from "second-hand-smoke".

In this regard, we must all recognise that smoke easily wafts from one table to another. Thus, there is no point in designating a few tables adjacent to the smoking area as "non-smoking" tables.

This is an example of ridiculing the law.

The only way for restaurant owners to show their respect for the law is to ban smoking on their premises totally. Smokers can puff in the toilets. Restaurant owners can also partition smoking and non-smoking areas.

Local authorities can then begin to enforce the law by inspecting the restaurants.

The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism can play a co-operative role by issuing an "Environment Friendly" certificate to restaurants that conform to the law, and even mentioning these restaurants in their brochures for the information of health-conscious tourists.

At Sekolah Sri Cempaka, Bukit Damansara, 1,200 students belong to a society called Cadas (Cempaka Anti-Drugs, Alcohol and Smoking) where we are taught to develop a healthy lifestyle.

I am Cadas president and many of us have succeeded in influencing our parents and we do our best to avoid restaurants that do not adhere to the "No Smoking" laws.

In this regard, we note with appreciation that our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and many other leaders such as

judges and professional figures, despite their stressful jobs, are non-smokers. They set a good example.

However, the bulk of smokers today come from among the younger age groups.

They are victims of the "indirect" publicity blitz (through popular music gatherings and sports) and their numbers are growing by the month.

This fact has serious implications for health planning and the future productivity of the nation. It merits the attention of leaders in all spheres of our society.