

Hard To Swallow

The move to have all over-the-counter medicine carry a security hologram sticker has not gone down well with the industry.

By Habhajan Singh

THIS was one bitter pill for the pharmaceutical players to swallow. Like a child cringing from medicine, they were desperately trying to avoid it. The prescription, on Government's order, was the mandatory hologram labelling for all over-the-counter (OTC) medicine.

For the moment at least, the industry players have won the battle. The Government has decided to defer implementation of the project to the middle of next year. Initially, the plan was to get all medicine and health supplements available on the shelf slapped with the security sticker. This would be provided by a private company, Mediharta Sdn Bhd.

It is understood that the decision to put the implementation on ice came from Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek himself. Says a ministry official: 'They are having issues with the logistics. The minister agreed to give the industry people more time to prepare for the move.'

Might this deferment lead to a scrapping of the project? 'There is no talk of abandoning the idea,' the official tells *Malaysian Business*. 'This is just a lull before the storm.'

According to the earlier plan, come 2005, all medicine available on the shelf must carry the Government-designated Meditag, the name given to the hologram sticker.

Some industry players, including members of the Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia (Phama), had suggested softening the idea by making it voluntary. They argued that some of the more established players already had their own security labelling; others felt the hologram stickers would not have the desired effect.

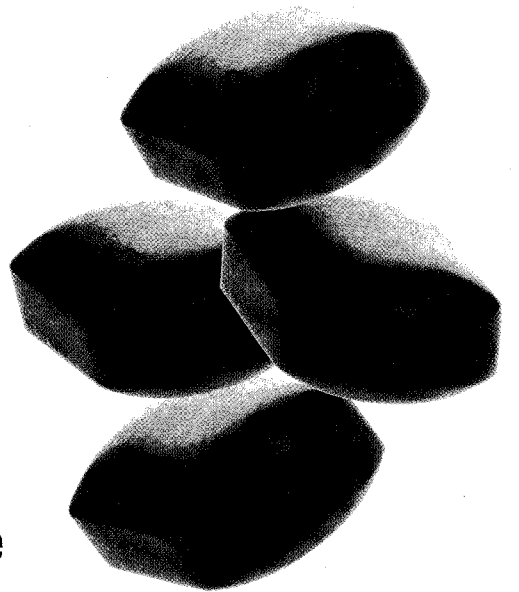
'The ministry has taken note of the industry call to make the move optional. But it is unlikely to budge here,' says the ministry official.

The hologram sticker idea was mooted to combat the proliferation of counterfeit products. It has its genesis in the 2003 Budget speech delivered by the then Prime Minister-cum-Finance Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, where he proposed to introduce special stickers for taxed cigarettes.

'Similarly, the Government will introduce stickers on items such as liquor and medicine, not only to ensure taxes have been paid but also to protect customers from purchasing counterfeit goods,' he outlined.

In March 2003, the Ministry of Health appointed Mediharta as exclusive distributor of the security stickers. Apparently, Mediharta won the hearts of the ministry people with its tie-up with a French company.

Until then, affected pharmaceutical players were apparently kept in the dark.



Our earlier report, which appeared in the MB Oct 1 issue

They claimed they were not consulted before the Government made the decision.

This led to one of the most unified protests by the industry's organisations. Besides Phama, they included the Malaysian Organisation of Pharmaceutical Industries (Mopi), Malaysian Chinese Medicine Producers, the Malaysian Dietary Supplement Association (Madsa), the Direct Selling Association of Malaysia (DSAM) and the Malaysian Direct Distribution Association.

'I cannot remember a previous issue that had managed to unite all these organisations. Meditag did,' says a senior official of one of the bodies.

Meditag awaits final resolution. This is one prescription not in the hands of the doctor. **mb**