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Health approach to drug use

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IN a statement made to the press recently, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said that Malaysia had lost its war on drugs. This was in response to the media's request for comments on the "decriminalisation" of drugs.

I believe the journalist had inadvertently used the term "decriminalisation" when he or she meant the "legalisation" of drug use. The follow-up comment by the director of Narcotics of the Royal Malaysia Police has further given the public a wrong impression due to the use of incorrect terminology.

It is important therefore to make the distinction between decriminalisation and legalisation of drug use to avoid confusion in future. Legalisation is the process of making drug use legal, which means all punishments previously related to drug use will be abolished.

When drugs are legalised, drug users will be able to consume drugs in the open or in designated areas.

On the other hand, decriminalisation means that the current punishment/penalties meted out to drug offenders will no longer be applicable or will be abolished.

Drug users will be subject to lighter punishments/penalty. For example, they may be mandated to enrol in a treatment programme rather than being sent to prison.

In general, there are two approaches to decriminalisation: *De jure* decriminalisation, where criminal penalties under the law are abolished through legal reforms, and *de facto* decriminalisation, where criminal penalties are maintained under the law but are not applied or enforced in practice.

As knowledge in the field of addiction progresses, there is clear evidence that the brain of drug users is affected because of long-term drug use.

What these drug users require is medical attention rather than punishment. As a society, we need to change our perspective of how we

view people who use drugs. We need to view them from a public health perspective rather than from the criminal justice perspective.

There is clear evidence too to show that moving towards the public health perspective does not cause an increase in crime in society. It is also more cost-effective.

On the other hand, using a criminal justice approach has proven to be unsuccessful not only in Malaysia but also in other parts of Asia. We should not keep doing the same things and expect results.

As pointed out by the Deputy Prime Minister, more than half of the prisoners in our country are serving sentences for drug offences. If we examine this figure closely, we will find that most of them are drug users (not traffickers) who are serving sentences for possession of small amounts of drugs. Most of them would have been in possession of the drugs for their own use or might have sold a small amount to fund their own drug-us-

ing habit and/or addiction.

In applying the law strictly, these users are of course guilty. However, we need to understand that the drugs in their possession are for their own use. It does not serve any purpose to keep them in prison where there is no treatment provided.

It is to be stressed that these users need medical attention/treatment. Punishment by prison confinement will not address their addiction.

For the record, I am referring to drug users and not drug traffickers. Enforcement efforts to reduce the supply of drugs and to prevent the use of illegal drugs should of course continue as usual.

But when dealing with youths who are tech savvy, more innovative approaches may be needed.

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