

Should there be mandatory drug screening in schools?

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The Tired Eye

THE Home Ministry recently indicated that it is proposing that the government conduct drug screening in schools from next year.

Deputy Home Minister Dato Sri Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said the ministry will need to have all necessary equipment and mechanisms to carry out drug screening in each state to combat the drug problem in the country.

Other notable figures have since also commented on the issue. Assistant Minister of Youth Development Datuk Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah and Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation (MCPF) vice-chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye have both indicated that it is awareness of the dangers of drugs and an integrated approach that is really needed to reach out to youngsters.

The Eye agrees that the problem of drug abuse should be nipped in the bud. Two years ago, the Eye chanced upon the Cure and Care Rehabilitation Centre in Papar, Sabah's Facebook page. Among the photos of rehabilitative programmes (of course these didn't show the faces of their clients) were those of day-clinics for young drug abusers.

Having known someone who had undergone a rehabilitation programme at the centre, the Eye asked about these young boys. Shockingly, some were as young as 10 and already addicted to some substance or another.

One may wonder, where would kids as young as 10 get the money to buy drugs? The general perception is that drugs are expensive, especially when we read about the street value of confiscated drugs.

Drugs come in all forms, from a simple can of rubber cement that many of us have around the house, to Nospin pills that sell for RM1 a pop (they used to be even cheaper), and of course synthetic drugs (Eye prefer to call them poisons) like syabu or meth, ecstasy pills and other ever-evolving designer drugs. So kids getting into drugs is nothing new. Kids getting into drugs and being nurtured by dealers is also nothing new. They get freebies in return for being runners for the dealers.

So should blanket drug screening be implemented in schools? There are both pros and cons. The pros are that kids would be more aware of the immensity of the drug scourge if screenings are carried out regularly.

The cons, as pointed out by Datuk Abdul Karim, is that the image of schools found to have a high incidence of drug abusers would be marred, and the cost to carry out mandatory screening would be very high.

Eye can foresee that many will argue is it better to save face and money or save a generation?

Drug screenings have been carried out at some schools in Sarawak when the administrators of the schools suspect students are getting high and when the schools are located in areas known for drug abuse.

Does the Eye agree for school children to be screened for drugs? Yes. Does the Eye agree to mandatory or regular drug screening? Not really.

You see those who take drugs will go to great lengths to manipulate the screening process if such screenings are to become a regular practice in schools.

They have many tricks up their sleeves, including acquiring urine samples from friends who are clean in little plastic bags and keeping them close to their bodies, to maintain body temperature and so that it is convenient for them to fill urine sample vials when needed.

Random drug screenings are the way to go, coupled with intense awareness programmes to educate students on the dangers of drugs.

Creating awareness of the drug scourge should be experiential. Well, that of course does not mean one actually has to experience what it is like to take drugs. One move that the relevant agencies and NGOs can take to make awareness programmes more effective is by regularly carrying out visits to rehabilitation centres and even prisons. Run a special programme to let the youths experience a couple of hours in prison, handcuffs and all, in a specially-designated area as part of the awareness visits.

Let them interact with former addicts who have turned their lives around and also with those still undergoing rehab.

Let them also interact with former addicts who now bear the weight of illnesses brought about by their years of drug abuse.

Back to screenings in schools, if this is to be implemented, it should be a well thought out process. Teachers and school administrators must be sensitive towards when and how to call for random screenings.

They must be made aware of and educate themselves on signs and behaviour patterns to look out for in those who abuse drugs – there is indeed much to learn because abuse of different illicit substances leads to different signs and behaviours.

So it is an eye for the Eye, especially where schools are located in known haunts for dealers, but the screenings must be random, never scheduled.

Comments can reach the writer via columnists@theborneopost.com.