Sweet killer stalks M'sians

It's time for the government to provide more incentives to promote a healthy lifestyle in the wake of the diabetes epidemic.

ONE in five Malaysians is living with diabetes. Let that sink in.

In a nation renowned for its vibrant food culture – from nasi lemak to roti canai – Malaysia is grappling with a less savoury reality: It has surged to the 13th highest ranking globally for diabetes prevalence, up from 16th just four years ago.

Within Asean, Malaysia holds the unwelcome top spot with an adult prevalence rate of 21.1%, affecting over 4.7 million people.

These are shocking statistics. Our health authorities have been trying to stem the rising tide of diabetes cases for the last 10 years via various programmes, but have met with limited success.

The Health Ministry-led Sugar Tax introduced in 2019, which placed an excise duty of 40 sen on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), has led to a 9.3% reduction in sugary drink consumption.

It's a modest success but insufficient alone – diabetes involves total calorie intake, carbs, fats, and inactivity, not just SSBs.

Budget 2025 raised it to 90 sen per litre and expanded scope, which should help further.

Diabetes, particularly type 2, has become a silent epidemic in Malaysia, driven by factors like urbanisation, sedentary lifestyles and dietary shifts toward processed foods high in sugar and fats.

The recent data above from the International Diabetes Federation underscores the severity.

Projections paint an even grimmer picture, with experts forecasting that diabetes could impact seven million adults by 2025, pushing the prevalence to 31.3%.

This isn't just a health statistic – it's a workforce crisis.

With Malaysia's labour force exceeding 16 million, diabetes-related complications like heart disease, kidney failure and neuropathy are sidelining productive years.

The Malaysian Medical Association has sounded the alarm, urging "drastic action" amid this "critical" situation.

For companies, where employees spend a third of their waking hours, ignoring this trend risks higher turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity.

The financial strain of diabetes extends far beyond individual families, burdening the entire economy.

Direct healthcare costs alone for diabetes in Malaysia tally around RM4.4bil annually – more than triple the RM1.3bil spent on cancer treatment.

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On your side

When factoring in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cardiovascular issues and cancer – often diabetes comorbidities – the annual toll exceeds RM9.65bil, equivalent to about 1.5% of GDP.

Indirect costs amplify the damage: lost productivity from sick days, premature retirements and caregiver burdens.

Hospitalisations for diabetes-related illness are straining public and private healthcare systems alike.

As the country navigates this escalating public health emergency, a pivotal question emerges for its leaders: Is now the moment for Malaysian companies to step up with health-based incentives for employees?

It should be a no-brainer actually, both for the public and private sector.

It is time for the Human Resources Ministry to step in.

Incentivise programmes like subsidised gym memberships, free or low-cost health screenings, glucose monitoring rewards, healthy cooking classes or even incentives for step challenges.

These health-based incentives could save our companies millions in the long run.

In the United States, Johnson & Johnson, for instance, saved US$250mil in healthcare costs over a decade through wellness initiatives, while broader studies there show reductions in absenteeism by up to 25% and boosts in productivity worth thousands per employee annually.

In Malaysia, similar programmes could yield outsized returns: healthier employees mean fewer sick days (diabetes causes two to three times more absenteeism than average) and lower insurance outlays.

Tax incentives via the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) could expand deductions for verified wellness spending. Many companies already tap into HRDF for training; this can be extended to health.

Improving your health can also be beneficial for your career.

Employees who are enrolled in these programmes can be rewarded for meeting targets, through lower insurance premiums, extra leave and cash bonuses.

Government-linked companies like PETRONAS and Maybank, and some multinationals already run strong health programmes with measurable incentives.

Smaller firms could start simple via PERKESO's health screening perks or group insurance add-ons. The Human Resources Ministry introducing tax rebates for wellness budgets would accelerate adoption nationwide.

The time is overdue. With an ageing workforce and NCDs projected to cost billions more, proactive employers will save money, boost productivity and attract talent.