

Wither the 24-hour eatery?

LET'S face it, Malaysians love to eat.

In fact, this is an understatement, because eating out is a national pastime and the proliferation of late-night eateries and 24-hour Mamak restaurants only fuel our appetites.

And it is because of this penchant for late-night suppers that there was a predictable backlash against a proposal from the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) to repeal the operating licences of 24-hour eateries.

This week, the NGO said the widespread availability of food and drink round-the-clock can cause negative effects such as weight gain, sleep disorders and digestive issues.

CAP president Mohideen Abdul Kader, in a statement posted on Facebook, said that limited access to late-night eating will be healthier for Malaysians.

"Presently, Malaysians are unhealthy as we have the highest prevalence of obesity among adults in South-East Asia. In the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey, 50.1% of our adult population were reported to be overweight (30.4%) or obese (19.7%).

He said obesity is a risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

CAP's proposal to curb such eateries may have drawn brickbats, but stakeholders should still be concerned over our unhealthy eating habits.

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On your side

"Given the situation and the high number of Malaysians affected, it was revealed that RM9.65bil was spent annually to deal with NCDs in the country.

"Though shortening the operating hours for eateries would not completely solve the obesity issue in Malaysia, it would help reduce late-night eating among Malaysians," he added.

I believe that, though well-meaning, CAP's suggestion to reduce the operating hours of late-night eateries, is misguided.

Obesity is caused by unhealthy diets and a lack of physical activity, so closing 24-hour eateries would not guarantee that people do not look for alternatives.

CAP's proposal, if it is accepted by the authorities, would not

address the health problems that Malaysians have because many resort to eating junk food during the day. And this is also because healthier food is more expensive than junk food.

Rather than Big Brother deciding or legislating what, where and when we should eat, individuals should be responsible for their own eating habits and lifestyles. There is no quick fix to these obesity issues, and the answer to reducing NCDs is education and nutritional awareness.

In an immediate response, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad said there must be engagement with stakeholders of the 24-hour eatery ecosystem, as well as a well-prepared paper on the issue before the proposal is studied by the government.

He said the low "health literacy" and the needs of certain groups will have to be taken into account before doing so and pointed out that it is better to prioritise the menu content and cleanliness of these eateries rather than ban their round-the-clock operations.

I couldn't agree more. I am not against late night eateries, but the

authorities need to crackdown on the lack of cleanliness at these restaurants. Many of these establishments are breeding grounds for rodents due to unhygienic practices. Food waste is a concern as is proper disposal of garbage.

A quick check of DBKL's guidelines for such eateries is clear: 24-hour restaurants must not be located near residential areas, cleanliness including disposal of grease traps and garbage must be adhered to, excessive noise, disturbance and bad odours are not permitted, and these establishments are not allowed to place chairs and tables on pavements and parking lots.

It would be foolish to assume that the above rules are followed. Take a drive, or better still, visit any of these 24-hour eateries. I venture that there is a blatant disregard for some or all of these guidelines.

Both the Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma) and the Malaysian Indian Restaurant Owners Association (Primas) were quick to slam CAP's proposal, but this was only to be expected as these establishments constitute the

bulk of the 24-hour eateries.

Statements issued by both the associations rightly pointed out that there is a segment of the population, including uniformed services and factories, that depend on late-night eateries.

But beyond providing employment opportunities and generating revenue through food sales and tourism, these restaurants have a duty, via their respective associations, to work with the local authorities to ensure that guidelines are followed, and hygienic conditions are enforced.

"Primas is willing to work with CAP to find ways in providing healthy and nutritious food for the people and I believe the members would also gladly participate in any food campaigns to provide healthy menu for the people," said the president of the association, J. Suresh.

This is a welcome initiative if it comes to fruition. CAP's proposal may have stirred a hornet's nest, but it has also served to shed a light on the ticking timebomb that Malaysia has – an unhealthy populace that is costing the government billions in terms of dealing with NCDs.