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KUALA LUMPUR, July 17 (Bernama) -- As an average individual, we use hundreds of products daily either for consumption or application. Naturally, we expect these products to be harmless but this is not always the case.

According to the Malaysian Association of Standards Users (Standards Users) Director, Ratna Devi Nadarajan, there have been incidents where people get sick or injured when consuming or applying certain products.

"In the United Kingdom, it was reported that an average working woman uses 20 different types of substances a day and absorbs more than 2.0 kg of chemicals through the skin, nose and mouth.

"In terms of food, we consume a cocktail of food additives and wear attires which were treated and dyed and drive around town where by-products of engine combustion is involuntarily inhaled," she told Bernama.

According to Ratna Devi, tonnes of detergents and their substances enter our water resources and may end up in the food that we eat through aquatic produces.

"Pesticides are used to enable better yield for vegetables, fruits and cash crops. Pesticides too may enter our water resources and arrive at our tables inside aquatic food sources," she said.

WHAT IS PRODUCT SAFETY?

Products are made to satisfy the needs of consumers to make their life easier apart from establishing their status.

However the same products, due to their design, content and the way they are used, misused or abused will pose danger to the consumers' safety and health.

Ratna Devi said the extent to which a product poses danger to consumer safety and health is determined by the presence of detriments and their likelihood to cause harm under either normal or abnormal conditions.

Citing the presence of fuel in a vehicle as an example, she said the fuel itself is a hazardous substance to human and environmental health.

"The likelihood that it will spill, be consumed or come in contact with the vehicle user and causes harm under normal use is minimum. Thus under normal conditions the vehicle is relatively safe as long as the fuel, tank and other devices in the combustion system are manufactured according to specified standards.

"Deliberate contact with the fuel or ingestion will definitely result in severe safety and health problems. Such is the results under abnormal use or if the vehicle is involved in an accident. The same goes for ointments for external applications where it will only cause harm to consumers if ingested," she explained.

Therefore, according to Ratna Devi, a safe product means any product when used under normal condition does not present any risk or only minimum risks, when the product is used as intended.

The categories of consumers at risk when using the product should also be considered, particularly children, the disabled and the elderly.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Ratna Devi said the extent of safety issues cannot be established since consumers, people in the medical profession and industries are not compelled to report safety incidents or accidents caused by products, to the relevant authorities.

"But for most products there are neither laws nor accessible mode to communicate the incidents or accidents easily to the relevant agencies," she claimed.

She also said many products especially for vulnerable groups like children and the elderly are not regulated.

"For instance, toys in Malaysia are not regulated (in terms of safety). Even a country like Albania which is still behind Malaysia in terms of economic development has already regulated import of toys into their country.

"There are other products like prams and cribs for infants and children which are not regulated in terms of safety. Perfumed products like air fresheners and doop sticks are also not regulated

although they use man-made chemicals," she said.

She also discussed the usage of water filters which are fast becoming an indispensable part of a house.

"Who regulates to ensure that the domestic water treatment devices meet safety requirements?"

"Without proper maintenance, accumulation of slime and dirt on the filters (high in bacterial content) may get into the water we are drinking and may cause poisoning. Consumers are also taken in by promise of better health if they purchase the water treatment devices," she said.

Another point of contention for Standards Users, said Ratna Devi is that consumers are not provided with easy access to make enquiries on safety products.

According to her, there are different agencies regulating different types of products.

"The Food Safety and Quality Division (an agency under the Ministry of Health) regulate food products as per the Food Act 1983 and Food Regulations 1985 while the National Pharmaceutical Control Board (NPCB) regulates cosmetics, drugs and pharmaceutical products. The regulation of electrical products comes under the Energy Commission (under Ministry of Water, Energy and Communication). Regulation of pesticides comes under the Pesticides Board," she said.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM STANDARDS USERS

Standards Users therefore suggested that the authority established a centralised agency to handle all forms of product safety complaints or even all types of consumer complaints.

"Bodies like the National Consumers Complaint Centre (NCCC) which has handled about 19,000 complaints in 2006 and about 10,000 complaints as of June 2007 can be supported to do just that," said Ratna Devi.

Standards Users also recommended that accidents/incidents/injuries reporting mechanisms be established in order to capture relevant data for product safety monitoring and administrative purposes.

Ratna Devi said the industries must be provided with adequate information and implementation support to comply with both voluntary and mandatory safety standards.

"Free consultation to small/medium-scale enterprises and industries, periodic training and retraining will help build capacity to ensure manufacture and distribution of safe products," she said.

She said consumers should also be proactive in dealing with this issue of products' safety.

Consumers, she said, should take time to read the products' labels and be inquisitive before purchasing products which are believed to have safety issues.

"More importantly, do not take safety for granted and lodge complaints as many times as we feel necessary until we get a satisfactory reply," she added.

Standards Users, established in September 2004 with the support and assistance from the Department of Standards Malaysia (Standards Malaysia) is a non-governmental organisation affiliated to the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (Fomca).

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