

# Less fire if you can't smoke till you're 21?

BY SAMANTHA BOH

TILL he turned 20, guitar teacher Shaun Soh had taken only the occasional puff. But when he entered national service (NS), he was promoted to the rank of Full-Fledged Smoker.

“The smoking corner was where everyone could just take a break to talk and share. There was a sense of camaraderie,” said Mr Soh, now 32.

“Smokers are smokers, no one pulls rank.”

Health did not factor in his thinking.

He reasoned: “Since I am already exercising so much, what can a cigarette do?”

National service is where many Singaporean boys pick up the habit, said experts.

But the Health Promotion Board (HPB) is studying New York's recent move to raise the legal age for purchasing cigarettes from 18 to 21. It will assess whether to introduce a similar measure here.

“But all these have to be studied well before we go out there and say this is something we want to do,” said Vasuki Utravathy, deputy director of substance abuse at HPB.

If the move kicks in, it could mean that young men who enlist for NS are kept away from the temptation of smoking, just to fit

in. Many experts strongly favoured this approach.

A 2010 national health survey found that 75 per cent of smokers picked up the habit before 21 years of age.

“Young people may also find it hard to quit the habit and will most probably remain smokers throughout their adult lives,” said Paul Oh, senior lecturer at Singapore Polytechnic's diploma in nutrition, health and wellness.

Mr Oh said raising the legal smoking age would make it even harder for young people to lay their hands on cigarettes. Currently, some of them are getting their cigarettes from peers who are only slightly older.

But Ms Vasuki cautioned that though some countries did not allow youth to buy cigarettes before the ages of 19 or 20, it did not mean that smoking was less prevalent there.

Still, if nothing else, raising the minimum age could give young people a better reason to say no to friends who offered them cigarettes, said Alfred Tan, executive director of Singapore Children's Society.

“They tend to feel embarrassed or fear being ostracised when they refuse cigarettes from their friends as they would appear awkward to hang out with,” said Mr Tan.

“So if it is illegal, then perhaps

it would seem as a better reason to speak up.”

But this measure would definitely not be foolproof as many would still find a way to get their hands on some, even if illegal.

“It is more an issue about why they want to smoke and the image they have of smokers,” said Richard Cheong, director of Hero Training & Consultancy.

The move would work better if they could be convinced that their money could be better spent elsewhere, he added.

Iris Lin, senior social worker at Fei Yue Community Services, said: “Perhaps the next step would be to consider raising the legal drinking age.”

Meanwhile, HPB's national anti-smoking campaign, I Quit, last year saw 14 per cent of some 3,400 participants quit smoking after six months.

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