

View sick leave issue from healthy angle

THE ongoing debate on the abuse of sick leave needs to be looked at from a fresh perspective.

The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) is naturally upset over what it sees as blatant abuse of sick leave by recalcitrant workers.

It claims that Malaysia has one of the highest number of medical certificates issued in the region, with sick leave costing employers up to RM1bil annually.

According to MEF executive director Shamsuddin Bardan, workers take MCs to go fishing, watch a movie, attend a wedding *kenduri* or send the kids to school.

Workers, on the other hand, vehemently disagree, judging by the response to a Star Online poll that posed the question: "Do you agree with the MEF that many Malaysians feign illness to get MC?"

Of the 35,000 votes so far, 78% disagreed, 20% agreed and 3% confessed that they had done so in the past. And in the sharing on Facebook and through letters to *The Star*, many have legitimate arguments that put the blame back on the bosses.

And, caught in the middle, are the doctors who are seen as accomplices for workers to get their MCs.

Under the Employment Act 1955, an employee who has served at least five years with the same company is allowed up to 22 days of sick leave annually. The number of days do not include the 60 days of entitlement for hospitalisation.

Most companies follow the statutory requirement although some companies have even more generous entitlements.

Because there is a designated number of days allowed for sick leave, some workers feel that the number of days so given must be fully taken up, even though the intent is



to set a ceiling.

This issue is not a Malaysian phenomenon.

In the US, research has shown that on average, only a small portion of employees will rarely, if ever, be absent because of illness. They pride themselves on being able to fulfil their work responsibilities even when they do not feel well. The great majority will use a few sick days a year, well within most guidelines. The problem is with the third group, usually about 5% or so, who use up their sick days because they consider it their right.

The Malaysian scenario may not be all that different and we have to be careful that we do not use a sledgehammer to swat a fly when addressing this issue.

While the MEF can argue in terms of man-hours lost, we have to be careful that we do not punish the majority simply because of the shortfalls of a small minority.

Marriage counsellors these days have found that rather than concentrate on why marriages fail, it is more useful to talk about those marriages that work.

For example, if, as the MEF has pointed out, some workers fake illnesses to attend to their young children or aged parents, why not allow flexible working hours to address this problem?

In the same context, rather than focus on the people who fall sick, or pretend to fall sick, we need to move towards looking at

those who stay healthy.

Incentives to stay healthy, however, must be distinguished from incentives not to take sick leave. The taking of sick leave under legitimate circumstances must not be portrayed as negative behaviour.

American companies have found that one of the best methods of increasing productivity and improving company morale is done through the use of encouraging employees to stay healthy.

Employees that live unhealthy lifestyles are costing companies billions of dollars without even realising it. Recent studies have found obesity (a condition that can be largely preventable) to have cost American businesses over US\$12.7bil in health care, sick leave, and life and disability insurance.

And we know that obesity is indeed becoming a serious problem in Malaysia.

Another example: We all know that smoking is bad for health. Although many companies have declared their buildings as smoke-free zones, that does not stop workers from taking breaks to smoke.

Going by the reasoning that smokers tend to have more health issues than non-smokers, companies can provide incentives to these workers to kick the habit.

Make healthy living part of the corporate agenda. Doctors know that when workers give them fictitious symptoms that cannot be medically diagnosed, the real reason could be just that they are just exhausted.

If we focus on healthy living and how it is good both for employer and employee, the abuse of sick leave will be minimised.

It won't be eliminated totally because there will still be those who can come up with creative ways to call in sick but the MEF will certainly not be sickened by future statistics.