

## COMMENTARY

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# Entire nation is red, for lack of iodine

**W**e are all red. The whole country is red. Not even one province is yellow. It is real. It is official. And it is the single most common cause of mental retardation and brain damage in the world.

Sorry, I am not talking about Thailand's political divide. I am talking about Thailand's national statistics on iodine deficiency disorder (IDD).

Thyroid stimulating hormone tests among newborns is one of the best indicators of IDD, which causes loss of IQ and risk of brain damage. The province which passes the international standard gets the yellow colour. Red is for the province that fails.

According to the recent national survey by the Ministry of Public Health, Thailand's IDD map is all in red because the whole country fails the iodine deficiency test.

Disbelief was my first reaction. How could this be? Thailand has been combating iodine deficiency for decades. School children in remote and hilly areas far from the coast have long been given iodinated water. Endemic goitre has disappeared. Besides the abundant sea salt, a better transportation network has given people more access to seafood. There are also some brands of iodised fish sauce, snacks and instant noodles on the supermarket shelves.

I thought iodine deficiency was history. But statistics say otherwise. Urinary iodine concentration in pregnant women is one good indicator of iodine deficiency. The survey conducted by the Public Health Ministry shows urinary iodine concentration in pregnant women across

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regions has deteriorated over the past decade. It also shows inadequate iodine in 70% of pregnant women. This is a potential cause of foetal and neo-natal brain damage as well as loss of IQ for 100,000 newborn each year.

Consumption of iodised salt is another indicator. According to the National Statistics Office, only 47% of the population have adequate intake. The stark gap between the very rich and the very poor reflects the country's steep socio-economic inequity. While 67% of the very rich have adequate intake of iodised salt, it is only 24% for the very poor.

The repercussions are severe. Iodine deficiency does not only cause goitre, but also spontaneous abortion, stillbirth, mental deficiency, stunted growth and hypothyroidism. It also suppresses the IQ level by 10-15 points.

With the large rich/poor gap in iodine intake, the physical and mental burden falls largely on the poor.

Statistics also show that Thailand does not fare very well in providing access to iodised salt to the population, compared with other countries in the region. Here, iodised salt is available to only 57% of the population. It is 93% in Vietnam, 90% in China, 88% in the Philippines, 85% in Laos, 84% in Burma, and 72% in Indonesia and Cambodia, according to Unicef.

True, the development of intelligence and learning ability is a function of multiple factors. Still we cannot refute that IDD is the single most common cause of preventable mental retardation and brain damage. And given the steady and worrying decline of IQ levels among Thai children, it would be foolish and cruel not to beef up our policies and measures to address iodine deficiency.

Making it legally compulsory for all salt in Thailand to be iodised is the answer, according to Unicef. The increase in production costs is negligible, said Mr Tomoo Hozomi, Unicef's represen-

tative in Thailand. It is also a misunderstanding that there is enough iodine in sea salt, he added. Universal salt iodisation, meanwhile, would ensure that all cooked and processed foods — fish sauce and all — will provide the entire population with a steady supply of iodine throughout their lives.

So what are the stumbling blocks?

To start with, most people still do not realise the seriousness of iodine deficiency. Resistance among small-scale sea salt farmers is understandable when government help is non-existent. The serious lack of political will is also why universal iodised salt remains on the back burner.

We can no longer let inertia reign when our children's mental and intelligence development is at stake.

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