**SCMP Article**

**Hong Kong is a nanny state of our own making**

Should the government issue advice to the public – through TV announcements and posters – about the dangers of smoking? I expect most of us would say yes. But what about similar publicity campaigns on other issues? Should the government produce and broadcast messages encouraging us to wash our hands, eat fruit daily, floss our teeth, consume shellfish safely, and take care when cleaning windows?

Should the government speak out when private citizens or groups propose something that is foolhardy, even if it is perfectly legal? Should the government nag us as if we were children, or as if we didn’t know how to teach our own children? Or should officials leave us alone and assume we have common sense?

This question came up recently when a group that promotes running announced a fun community and fundraising event near the Kai Tak cruise terminal in November. As well as music and other activities, there was to be a “beer run” – in which participants over 18 could have a beer every 400 metres of a 1,600m course.

Such events, sometimes called a “city beer mile”, are common fancy-dress charity fundraising activities in the US and elsewhere. However, the Hong Kong health authorities did not like the idea. Health officials wrote to the organisers warning that participants could suffer dehydration and have accidents. And they urged that the run take place without the beer. Medical sector bodies joined in the criticism.

In fact, the same event took place last year without incident – and broadly similar activities have taken place in Hong Kong in the past. But, after the fuss this time, the organisers have changed their plans, and the Hong Kong beer run will now be beer-free.

It could well be that local media attention this year put officials and organisers under pressure. In any case, much of the online feedback was negative. One commenter posted that people drink and dance in nightclubs without trouble. Others said the story made Hong Kong look like a nanny state.

The Hong Kong beer run with no beer was reported overseas as an amusing news story.

We are already in danger of getting a reputation for being overly strict and over-regulated, especially about entertainment activities. A recent police raid on an indie club called Hidden Agenda drew a lot of criticism from young music fans. Although the raid was related to alleged work visa and building safety issues, many fans saw it more as a nanny state in action.

As with the beer run, it was an overseas news story. The angle was that Hong Kong officials and rules make it difficult for alternative live music venues to operate, unlike other cities. There are similar complaints about the extensive use of barriers for crowd control at outdoor events like music festivals.

Those of us who prefer quieter activities are also subject to official management and guidance. Parks have long lists of rules banning not only antisocial behaviour, but ball games or napping on benches. Hiking trails have concrete paths and handrails where they are probably not needed. Tougher safety rules have threatened some inter-island ferry operations.

Very dense high-rise development and small crowded streets present unique safety issues that Hong Kong officials must consider. Photo: ReutersBut there is another side to this. Hong Kong has seen some terrible tragedies, including fires, stampedes and boating accidents. Every time, lawmakers and the press expected and demanded that the government take action to avoid such mishaps occurring again. People might complain about how the government has covered hillsides with ugly concrete. Some of us might laugh at government TV ads warning about being near slopes during storms. But people have died because of landslides in the past.

If a tragedy happens again, it is likely that officials will be blamed for not preventing it. If our bureaucrats are too cautious and risk-averse, it is largely because we have pressured them into being that way.

Hong Kong clearly has safety issues that many other cities do not – such as very dense high-rise development, small crowded streets and extreme weather. Some special safety precautions are obviously necessary. The problem is that, at times, we go too far, when we could be more laid-back and more flexible.

But can the media, politicians and the public be a bit more laid-back and stop blaming public servants for everything that goes wrong?