Reminder to adopt healthy sleeping habits

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I STILL remember the close call my family had during a trip back to our hometown in Kedah when I was a child. At one point, my father who was driving briefly dozed off at the wheel but woke up just in time to avoid crashing into another vehicle.

Back then, I had no idea what had caused my father's temporary lapse in attention, but I found out later that it was due to microsleep.

Microsleep refers to brief, involuntary episodes of sleep while a person is awake. Microsleep episodes are unlikely to be dangerous when one is at home, but they can be dangerous in certain situations like when one is driving, operating heavy equipment or in clinical settings.

Microsleep poses a significant risk on the roads, particularly among drivers who embark on long-haul journeys without adequate rest.

In Malaysia, road crashes tend to peak during festive seasons, such as Hari Raya and Chinese New Year, as highways become congested with travellers heading back to their hometown.

How many of these crashes are linked to microsleep? Statistics from the Royal Malaysia Police showed that between 2011 and 2021, 1,305 crash fatalities were due to drivers falling asleep at the wheel.

While it is frequently associated with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which affects the quality of sleep, conditions such as insomnia, restless legs syndrome, epilepsy, and narcolepsy (a chronic neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to control sleepwake cycles) may contribute to microsleep.

The good news is that symptoms of these conditions can often be managed or reduced through targeted treatment and by improving sleep hygiene, a set of practices that promote quality sleep.

Key sleep hygiene practices include:

- Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time daily, even on weekends.
- Avoiding caffeine, nicotine, and heavy meals close to bedtime.
- Creating a comfortable sleep environment that is cool, dark, and quiet.

• Reducing screen time at least an hour before sleep, as blue light from electronic devices can interfere with the production of melatonin, a hormone that plays a role in the sleep-wake cycle.
• Engaging in regular physical activity but avoiding intense workouts right before bedtime.

World Sleep Day (March 14) is a good opportunity to remind people about the importance of sleep for overall health and well-being.

Established in 2008 by the World Association of Sleep Medicine (WASM), now known as the World Sleep Society (WSS), this annual event seeks to promote sleep health on a global scale.

The event has grown significantly over the years, holding activities ranging from educational talks to national media campaigns aimed at spreading awareness.

However, there is still much work to be done in reaching underserved regions, and integrating sleep health into mainstream public health initiatives.

Let us not underestimate the dangers of sleep deprivation and microsleep as we prepare for long journeys during the next festive season. A well-rested driver is a safer driver, and prioritising sleep is not just a personal choice; it is a responsibility for everyone on the road.