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The Covid-19 (Temporary Measures) (Control Order) Regulations, enacted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to manage the spread of Covid-19, contain comprehensive rules on various topics.

These include the safe operation of businesses, social distancing and mask-wearing.

I wish to point out two areas in which I feel that the regulations, and how they are communicated to the public, might be improved.

The first issue concerns smoking.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) website states that a person may remove his or her mask to smoke in public.

But the law does not say this.

Based on the regulations, people may remove their masks outside their homes only in limited circumstances, such as when eating, drinking, taking medicine, exercising, allowing an official (such as an election official) to verify one's identity, travelling in a car alone or with household members, undergoing facial or dental treatment, or doing work that cannot be performed with a mask.

Young children and those with certain medical conditions may also be exempted from wearing a mask, although they have to wear a face shield instead.

In short, under the regulations, smoking is not a permitted reason to remove one's mask.

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Further, it is unclear whether NEA has legal power to override the regulations. It is the regulations that have the force of law.

If MOH intended to allow smoking in public without a mask, the regulations should be amended. If not, then it appears that the regulations forbid removing one's mask to smoke.

Either way, the message communicated to the public should be in line with the regulations.

Clarity is all the more important given that it is a crime to disobey the regulations.

Second, I have noticed people removing their masks to speak on their mobile phones.

It can certainly be challenging to be heard clearly while wearing a mask, especially over the phone. One might, therefore, assume that one is allowed to remove one's mask to make a call.

Surely, one would think, the authorities would have allowed for this.

And yet, we are governed neither by the laws we would like to have nor by those we believe exist, but rather by the laws that are in force. The fact is that the regulations do not allow a person to remove his or her mask to speak to another person, including on the phone.

I hope that the authorities can communicate this rule, and its rationale, more emphatically to the public. This would contribute towards building a culture in which people know the rules that exist to protect public health and understand why they have been put in place.

The authorities should be commended for devising and publicising rules that aim to allow life to go on while protecting public safety, and to cover all bases and eliminate loopholes. It is in this spirit that I respectfully highlight these for consideration.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

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