

## Drug Smuggling in Malaysia- Our Recent Case Files

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**ABSTRACT:** The activities of illicit drug trafficking and smuggling have certainly posed huge challenges to enforcement authorities and forensic laboratories especially when these involve transnational syndicates. Malaysia, with its location as the transit hub of this region, have continuously to become the hot spot of illicit drug smuggling through its offences carries death penalty in this country. This paper describes the general trends of drug smuggling which include methods of drugs concealment, body packing, cross border smuggling using vehicles or via shipment. We also reported two cases of drug smuggling involving the forensic scientists from the Department of Chemistry Malaysia, which each case posed different challenges to the investigating scientist. We concluded that cross border and departmental collaboration as well as public information are vital for successful investigation.

**Keywords:** illicit drug, smuggling, trafficking, drugs concealment, body packing, cross border

### Introduction

Over the last decade, drugs remain the global threat to health and development of whole nation. According to the United Nation Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the estimated number of illicit drug users has achieved 300 million people at about 5.0% among the world population in 2013 [1]. Although the prevalence of drugs users is said to remain stable for recent years, this is not something exciting as the number of drug users is increasing continuously as a reflection to the increase of world population [1]. The war against illegal drugs has been declared at global level, but the outcome was seen to be rather disappointing. The increased demand of illegal narcotic drugs has triggered the drug trafficking and smuggling businesses [2] to meet continuous demand as evident by frequent news reported on drug trafficking and smuggling activities. At one end, it indicates the successfully execution of these criminal acts, but it is unknown on the number of those getting through the security system, which is expected to be high.

In Malaysia, drugs have been long abused even prior to the independence of the country. The problems created by these illegal drugs are not new issues, and have been well acknowledged by the nation leader who also declared drugs as the number one enemy of Malaysia decade ago [3]. Heroin, morphine and cannabis were the dominant drugs reported, but there is a trend of shifting these conventional substances to synthetic drugs (*i.e.* amphetamine-type stimulants and new

psychoactive drugs [1,4]. The demands for drugs in the domestic market, and in some instances for regional supply, have led to the emergence of clandestine drugs laboratories as well as intensified smuggling activities to include the drugs and their precursors and essential chemicals used in drugs manufacturing [4].

From cultivation of traditional herbs or synthesis of synthetic drugs to the consuming of these drug substances, every act involving drugs is always dangerous and complex. Within these, drug trafficking can be one of the most risky stages, involving the involuntary conveyance of drugs for profit or illegal purchase of drugs for peddling [5]. In order to make this happen, the illegal drugs have to be smuggled by the means of carrying, mailing, making use of human or animals to carry, or by other means of transporting to convey them from one place to another [5]. These criminal activities are no longer a drug problem but a serious security threat [1]. Nowadays, the crisis of drug trafficking and smuggling is gaining attention and alarming in most of the regions of the world, including Malaysia which is situated at the centre of South East Asia serving it as an ideal choice as the logistical transit point for drug traffickers and smugglers, not only as a transit route for illicit drugs, but also a final destination. In this paper, the trends of drug trafficking and smuggling activities were reviewed. Two cases involving cocaine smuggling in cans and food items were reported.

## General Trends of Drug Smuggling

The activities of illicit drug smuggling and law enforcement have made the race between drug traffickers and enforcement authorities to continue and become more challenging, often transnational in nature. A lot of “efforts” from both parties have been reported, with more creative ways of smuggling drugs passed through the watchful eyes in one side and more sophisticated equipments and detection policies at another side, with no sign of ending as long as there is a demand for drugs.

Drug smuggling is risky and can be sentenced to death when caught in some countries, including Malaysia. But still, the fact of the matter is, this crime is a big money business when succeed, and this is deemed worth risking to some for its money [5]. The methods of smuggling drugs to escape the supervision and detection of the authorities vary but generally could be divided into two categories, namely personal and impersonal. In former method, the smugglers will personally transport the illegal drugs across the border or the detection system, in or on their body as well as with the aid of equipments. In the latter, the drug traffickers or couriers are not directly involved in transporting the drugs across the border they intended.

## Methods of Drug Concealment

Due to increase in the cases of drug smuggling worldwide, tight security at the regional and international borders have forced the drug smuggling syndicates to use new methods to conceal these drugs to bypass security check including body packing detection [2,6]. The type of drugs intended to be smuggled are usually different in their packaging and size [7]. Condoms, latex, cellophane or other synthetic materials are frequently reported for drug packing [2,6,8]. In general, the packed drugs are usually in spherical or oval shapes, but can also be varied depending on the method of production and the route of administration into the body [2,6]. Mechanically produced drug packets are very uniform in shape compared to those manually wrapped. Furthermore, orally ingested packets are usually spherical and smaller in size (less than 2 cm) whereas those genitally inserted packets are generally oval in shape with larger size (4-6 cm in length and 2-3 cm in width) [2,6]. In many instances, the packet design has

been found to correlate with the country of origin [9].

## Body packing

Body packers are different from body stuffers who swallow the drug packages in an unplanned attempt to conceal an item especially during police check or arrest [10]. Besides young males, children, pregnant women and even dogs were used [5,8-9,11-12]. They are said to be easier to pass through the detection system and those authority personnel always give less attention to these groups of people, therefore are frequently exploited as drug mules. A number of cases were detected among women who attempted to smuggle the illicit drugs taped under their breasts. More recently, breast implant has becoming a new trend of woman drug smugglers. By comparison, the smugglers who ingest the drugs through the throat and also insert these substances into their bowels are exposed to greater safety risks if exploded, to those who smuggle the drugs outside their bodies. In most circumstances, education levels of body packers are generally low, usually as farmers or are jobless, regardless of how they smuggled the drugs. These are cheap labours available for hire, in addition to their desire for money and relatively lower chance of being detected making them the best “vehicle” to smuggle and transport drugs [5].

In most of the cases involving body packers, the traffickers have to take good care in the packaging the drug to ensure a safe transit through the gastrointestinal system without leakage or rupture [10]. The secured packaging of the drug substances is of most importance for traffickers as pose health risk and security alert at the checkpoints [11,13]. Drugs such as diphenoxylate or atropin may be taken by body packers to reduce the bowel motility and lessen the likelihood of premature passage of drug packets. Once successfully evading the detection systems, laxative is frequently used to speed the retrieval of the drug packets [8,11]. At Department of Chemistry, we have reported an interesting case “the Black Pearl” in 2010 [14].

## Common Drug Smuggling Methods

Besides utilising personal drug body packers as the “vehicle” to smuggle the drug substances, drugs can be smuggled in many other ways, commonly in double layers of suitcases and bags, in food products such as

fruits and candy, various household items and containers, hidden inside the airplane itself and other more creative ways. Some of the smuggling ways never come across in the mind of the authorities but were implemented by the crime syndicates. Wrapped boxes are always detected in airports and ports, and almost every passenger has these boxes with them while travelling. Some of these boxes are even gift wrapped and disguised as gifts. In certain instances, the illegal substances were kept inside a doll to sneak past the authorities, and most cases involved children. Dirty tricks and conceivable means were used including exploitation of the elders and children.

The most efficient way to move the drugs around is by a personnel automobile [15], particularly those accessible across the border, such as between Malaysia and Thailand. Personnel automotive grants more privacy rights and also as the only inconspicuous way to transport drugs to their destinations [15]. Hidden compartments exist in a car serve as the concealed space even the car was stopped during the traffic stops for a visible search [15]. The border check points always face with overload numbers of vehicles going in and out of a region, especially at peak hours. The security check on every vehicle and every compartment of each car becomes impossible and these are the opportunities for trafficking.

#### **Cross Border Shipment Attempt**

Drugs are often transported into the targeted area or country through shipment hidden in food cans, exported coffee bags, or even food such as pickles and fruits. Frozen foods like fish or shrimp were also used as the medium to conceal drugs. Dissolved drugs into liquid forms to disguise as bottled alcohol or drinks are an upcoming trend. Tapioca, book binding, artwork, cloth and shoes have been made empty to contain drugs. Though most of the smuggling cases appear simple and old-fashion, the authorities have to be alert at all time as more creative ways are being attempted such as using the container of toothpaste recently came across. In many instances, the chieftain was hardly detected due to indirect involvement of many people and stages in smuggling. Very often, the drug products were seized by the authorities but the responsible people for the crime often escape except the packers. Recently, the syndicates have switched the modus operandi of importing the drug substances into the nation in the form of parcel via air cargo [16] which

appears to be safe for the criminals. These are extremely hard to trace the crime because of false information on the parcel. Security scanning of such parcel is also difficult to identify its content through scanning, unless through opening.

#### **From Our Recent Case Files**

##### ***Liquid cocaine in cans***

In November 2012, following the information received from oversea drug enforcement counterparts, a ship from South America en route to Mozambique which made a stop at Port Klang in Malaysia was raided to have loaded with drug shipment. Police and Custom officers discovered nearly 1000 boxes of canned processed coconut milk and pineapples. Inspection by the police of over 100 cans using portable drug testing kit has finally found a tin to have tested positive for controlled drug substances before the forensic scientists from the Department of Chemistry Malaysia was called upon to examine seizure containing some 23000 cans. The authors were astonished by the syndicates' capability to have the sophisticated technique of embedding the liquidised cocaine and the facilities to pack the drugs into cans at an industry scale. The tens of thousands of physically identical cans posed a great challenge to us at the scene which took us a lot of time efforts to open and inspect all the cans that weighed about 400 g in which those tested positive to have contained about half of its weight with liquidised cocaine.

##### ***Drugs in mixed-pickles***

In July 2013, the forensic scientists from the Department of Chemistry Malaysia was called upon to examine seizure of mixed pickles contained in about 40 boxes seized in a factory storing food items such as vermicelli, tomato sauce, salt and imported fruit pickles in Nilai Industrial Parks Selangor following information from the public on suspicious operation in the premise. Packets of suspected controlled substances were hidden among packets of pickles which were believed to have supplied from the neighbouring country. Our examination revealed that 195 packets of them contain about 500 g of high grade heroine in each one, leading to a total of 100 kg heroine being recovered.

#### **Conclusion**

In Malaysia, cases of drug smuggling were reported but the techniques used were

generally considered conservative as compared to those innovative and creative ways reported in other countries, particularly in American and European countries. We discussed the general methods of drug smuggling and reported two interesting cases involving drug smuggling masked under food items that demonstrated the need for cross border and departmental collaboration of various parties for a successful operation. Increased effort has to be established by the authorities to detect, intercept and disrupt the narcotics smuggling. The drug traffickers will certainly continue to search for effective ways of transporting and delivering their products. Hence, it is extremely important for local, state and federal government to work together to improve the situation along the border, and all the entry points to Malaysia.

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