

**Open Letter to Secretary for Food and Health,
Hong Kong SAR Government
Support a Total Ban on Electronics Cigarettes**

Since its debut in 2004, electronic cigarettes (“e-cigarettes”) has become a rising trend, particularly in western countries. Its global sales recorded a rapid growth of over 120-fold increase from US\$20 million in 2008 to US\$2.5 billion in 2014. Currently there are over 8,000 flavours (including fruits, soft drink and tobacco, etc.) available in the market. Transnational tobacco companies had started to invest in e-cigarettes and launch extensive marketing campaign, targeting the youngsters who are curious and crave for novelties.

Low Prevalence of E-cigarette Use in Hong Kong

Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health (“COSH”) has serious concern on the spread of e-cigarettes. The Tobacco Control Policy-related Survey 2014, conducted by COSH during May to September 2014, interviewed 2,419 citizens and collected opinions on e-cigarettes from 809 citizens, including never smokers, ex-smokers and current smokers by telephone through random sampling. The survey found that 75.4% of respondents had heard of e-cigarettes but only 1.8% of respondents had used e-cigarettes. The rate of youngsters (aged 15-29) who had used e-cigarettes (4.4%) was higher than people aged 30 or above (1.0%).

The Secondary School Smoking Survey, conducted by the School of Public Health of The University of Hong Kong (“HKU”), interviewed 45,847 secondary one to six students from 75 randomly selected schools by anonymous questionnaire from September 2012 to April 2013. The results showed that 1.1% of secondary school students had used e-cigarettes. It was also found that students who used e-cigarette were more likely to have respiratory symptoms.

E-cigarette use in Hong Kong is now not common. But the overseas experience had showed that its growth is rapid, especially among the youngsters. In Korea, only 0.5% of youngsters had used e-cigarettes in 2008 but drastically increased to 9.4% in 2011. Rate of use among the US high school students boosted from 1.5% in 2011 to 13.4% in 2014. Another study in the US revealed that nearly half (43.9%) of the young e-cigarette users had an intention to smoke traditional cigarettes. Hong Kong should take prompt and strict actions to curb the use of e-cigarettes or it could widely spread in a very short-term. The effort of tobacco control and public health would be most likely undermined.

Marketing Strategies Targeted for Youngsters

According to COSH’s field study to the sale points and online shops of e-cigarettes conducted in March 2015, youngsters are the main target of the marketing strategies adopted by the sellers. Most e-cigarettes are sold on consignment at retail outlets and shopping centres specializing in trendy items, or through online platforms such as social media which youngsters view frequently. The flavours, designs and packaging of e-cigarettes are diverse and all appeal to the youth. The products are sold at affordable price started at several ten dollars.

Most e-cigarettes do not provide details on their ingredients and are marketed as non-addictive, aid for smoking cessation, accredited and environmentally friendly which mislead consumers on their safety. The sellers did not carry out any measures to verify the age of buyers. In general, the marketing strategies of e-cigarettes are similar to those used in the past for traditional cigarettes.

Unknown Effectiveness on Smoking Cessation and Safety

World Health Organization (“WHO”) re-stated that there is no sufficient scientific evidence supporting that e-cigarettes help smokers quit the habit and its safety remains unknown. The Secondary School Smoking Survey of HKU even showed that e-cigarette users who smoked were more nicotine dependent and less likely to quit. WHO urges countries to regulate e-cigarettes, including its advertising, promotion and sponsorship to minimize the risk of exposing the youngsters and never smokers to e-cigarettes. A number of countries have implemented different regulatory measures on e-cigarettes. Currently at least 13 countries, including Singapore, Thailand and Brazil, have imposed a complete ban on e-cigarettes, which will be a global trend.

According to the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance (Cap 138) in Hong Kong, any e-cigarettes with nicotine are categorized as pharmaceutical products and must be registered with the Pharmacy and Poisons Board of Hong Kong before sale or distribution. Currently e-cigarettes in Hong Kong are labelled as nicotine-free. Several overseas research studies have identified toxic chemicals and carcinogenic substances in e-cigarettes, for instance, nicotine, additives, heavy metal, propylene glycol, glycerin, formaldehyde and acetaldehyde which can bring health risks, such as nausea, bradycardia, respiratory depression and lung diseases, etc. Other unknown ingredients and unknown substances released during the vaping process may also cause negative effects on the health of users and non-users. Unintended exposure of cartridges and e-liquid in children could cause vomiting, cough, choke and death.

Normalization of Smoking

With concerted efforts of the Government and the community, the smoking prevalence of Hong Kong has dropped from 23.3% in 1980s to its lowest record, 10.7%. Nevertheless the epidemic of e-cigarettes will undermine the efforts of tobacco control. Though the usage of e-cigarettes is still low in Hong Kong, the awareness of the public, especially the youngsters, is increasing. The current regulation is not sufficient to monitor the ingredients, safety, sales and promotion of e-cigarettes. While the safety and effectiveness on smoking cessation of e-cigarettes remain uncertain, the fierce promotion of sellers has encouraged and normalized the smoking behavior. Precautious actions should be carried out promptly to diminish its impact on youngsters and stop it from becoming the gateway to smoking.

With reference to the successful experience of banning smokeless tobacco products in the 1980s and international examples of banning e-cigarettes, we urge the Government to impose a total ban on the sales, advertising, promotion and sponsorship, distribution, importation and manufacturing of e-cigarettes in Hong Kong. More resources should be allocated on publicity and education, as well as research on e-cigarettes to prevent its epidemic in Hong Kong and safeguard the public health.

c.c. to: Director of Health, HKSAR Government

Signatories to this letter:



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