

Open Letter to Secretary for Food and Health, HKSAR Government Enact Total Ban on E-cigarettes and Enlargement of Pictorial Health Warnings Promptly

We welcome the proposal of the Government submitted in May 2015 to further strengthen the tobacco control measures, including: 1) A smoking ban at eight bus interchanges located within the tunnel portal areas, 2) Prohibiting e-cigarettes, and 3) Enlarging the size of pictorial health warnings to at least 85% of the cigarette pack area, and increasing the number of forms of health warning to twelve.

We are glad that the first measure has been enacted since 31 March 2016, which can protect the public from the harms of secondhand smoke when waiting at the bus interchanges. We urge the Government to proceed with the legislation on the second and third measures as soon as possible to prohibit e-cigarettes and enlarge the pictorial health warnings on the cigarette pack.

Total Ban on E-cigarettes

The rapid growth in the use of e-cigarettes around the world is alarming. A diverse range of e-cigarettes are easily accessible in Hong Kong but their safety is questionable. Their marketing strategies are mainly targeting the young people, which could renormalize smoking behaviour and encourage an epidemic of tobacco use. COSH and other health groups have advocated the Government for a total ban on e-cigarettes since March 2015. Previously, there were news reports of primary school students in Hong Kong using e-cigarettes in the playground. To nip it in the bud, the total ban should be implemented promptly.

Contain harmful substances

Since most e-cigarettes in the market do not provide information on their components, COSH commissioned Hong Kong Baptist University to carry out a laboratory test on the components of thirteen e-cigarettes in the market from October 2015 to February 2016. The test confirmed the e-cigarettes contain harmful chemicals including formaldehyde, glycerin, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (“PAHs”) and poly-brominated diphenyl ethers (“PBDEs”). Formaldehyde and PAHs are known carcinogens that are hazardous to health. Significant variance in the components of e-cigarettes was found even in the same batch of the same brand.

On the other hand, the School of Public Health of The University of Hong Kong

was commissioned by COSH to conduct the Tobacco Control Policy-related Survey 2015 to monitor the prevalence of e-cigarette use and measure public opinion on its ban in Hong Kong. The survey found that 83.8% of respondents had heard of e-cigarettes compared to 75.4% in 2014. Around 0.7% of respondents had ever used e-cigarettes. It was also found that the main reason for e-cigarette use was not to aid smoking cessation and 68% of users did not know what they inhaled. Although only 0.2% of respondents had used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days, the rate (15.8%) among young current smokers aged 15-29 years old was significantly higher than that of current smokers aged 30 years old or above. Above all, the majority of respondents supported various regulatory measures on e-cigarettes including restricting the sale to minors (93.9%), banning their use in smoke-free areas (81.5%), restricting the sale of non-nicotine e-cigarettes (80.9%), regulating e-cigarettes as cigarettes (79.7%), and banning e-cigarette publicity and ads (71.7%). Over half of the respondents (53.9%) supported all of these regulatory measures.

Nip it in the bud

Global e-cigarette sales increased exponentially by 170-fold in a few years to a total of US\$3.5 billion in 2015, while its prevalence among youngsters also increased significantly in the U.S., and European countries. The flavours and designs of e-cigarettes available in Hong Kong are diverse and sellers usually use misleading marketing strategies to lure the youth. In addition, The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that e-cigarette is an effective smoking cessation method and urges countries to regulate it. Currently, at least 16 countries have imposed a complete ban on e-cigarettes, which signals a global trend.

With reference to the experiences of the U.S. and European countries, partial regulation or delay in legislation may cause a surge in the rate of youngsters using e-cigarettes. A total ban should be enforced promptly to prevent an epidemic of its use, minimize the health risk of the public to the exposure of e-cigarettes and stop it from becoming a gateway to smoking, especially among the youth.

Enlargement of Pictorial Health Warnings on Tobacco Products

We fully support the Government's proposal to enhance the health warnings on tobacco products, including enlarging the size of pictorial health warnings to at least 85% of the two largest surfaces of the packet and of the retail container, increasing the number of forms of health warning from six to twelve, and adding the quitline 1833 183 alongside the warning "Tobacco kills up to half of its users". These enhancements

should be implemented as quickly as possible.

Reduce the attractiveness of tobacco

The existing six forms of pictorial health warnings covering at least 50% of cigarette pack area have been used since 2007 and their deterring effect has faded. International research and experience has proved that pictorial health warnings can reduce the attractiveness of smoking, increase intention to quit, and deter youth from smoking. Larger warnings could educate smokers and the public on the health hazards of smoking, as well as prevent the tobacco companies from using cigarette packs for promotion.

The School of Public Health of The University of Hong Kong was commissioned by COSH to carry out the Tobacco Control Policy-related Survey 2015 to study the effect of the existing health warnings and public opinions on their renewal. Stronger public support for renewing the health warnings was found, such as displaying more threatening messages about the health risks of smoking (77.9% in 2015, 62.4% in 2014), and regular rotation of the health warnings (70.5% in 2015, 62.6% in 2014). About three-quarters of all respondents (72.3%; no data in 2014) supported to increase the coverage of the health warnings up to 75%, and 76.5% of all respondents (42.9% in 2014) opted for plain packaging of cigarettes. About half of the current smokers supported these measures, though their support was lower than never and ex-smokers.

Global trend: plain packaging and larger pictorial warnings

In recent years, many countries have successfully introduced more stringent measures to regulate tobacco packaging. Australia, the first country to introduce plain packaging in 2012, has resulted in a substantial decrease in the smoking population. It is followed by the United Kingdom, France and Ireland in 2016 and 2017 and more countries are considering to adopt. On the other hand, many countries have enlarged or plan to increase the coverage of pictorial health warnings of cigarette packs, including Nepal (90%), India (85%), Thailand (85%) and Uruguay (80%). The effectiveness of these measures has provided strong evidence and urgency for such approach in Hong Kong.

Dr Margaret CHAN, Director-General of WHO, highlighted the success of plain packaging to tackle the tobacco epidemic at the World Conference on Tobacco or Health in March 2015, and she called for more countries to adopt plain packaging or pictorial warnings covering more than 85% by 2018. WHO also designated “Get ready for plain packaging” as the theme of World No Tobacco Day 2016.

COSH has been advocating the implementation of plain packaging since May 2012. In view of the global successful examples and WHO's appeal, the Government should actively consider adopting plain packaging within 2 to 3 years.

With the Government's multi-pronged tobacco control policies over the years, the smoking prevalence of Hong Kong has gradually reduced to 10.5% in 2015. It is hoped that the above measures can be implemented as soon as possible to encourage more smokers to kick the habit and prevent youth from smoking. We also urge the Government to introduce other effective measures, like plain packaging and raising tobacco tax to further lower the smoking rate in Hong Kong and safeguard public health.

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cc: Director of Health, HKSAR Government
Legislative Council Members

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