

Alternative tobacco product met with government scepticism

 harbourtimes.com/2017/09/14/alternative-tobacco-product-met-government-scepticism/

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14/09/2017



Complete cessation from smoking still the ultimate goal of Hong Kong's tobacco control policy. As Philip Morris plans to launch its new heat-not-burn tobacco product IQOS in Hong Kong, the government issues hardline response.

The Hong Kong government has reinstated its warning over the “potential health effects and hazards” of e-cigarettes and other alternative tobacco products in response to Philip Morris’s plans to launch its new heat-not-burn product, IQOS in Hong Kong.

In a press statement, the tobacco heavywight believes that smokers switching to reduced-risk products such as vaperisers and IQOS is conducive to a smoke-free future, and can produce a positive result for public health.

“Our ambition is that all the people who would otherwise continue smoking switch to scientifically substantiated smoke-free non-combustible alternatives as soon as possible,” explained Brett Cooper, General Manager of Philip Morris Asia Limited.

According to Philip Morris International, the developer of IQOS, the number of people who had quitted smoking traditional cigarettes and switched to IQOS has reached 3 million. First launched in Japan, the heat-not-burn product has helped Philip Morris to market share in the country by 1.7 points to 27.1% in 2016.

The company urges the government to legalise distribution of alternative tobacco products in Hong Kong.

“We believe the Hong Kong SAR Government could look at these examples and include innovation as a critical part of the solution, especially where based on recent media reports, demand for potentially reduced-risk products among adult smokers in Hong Kong is increasing,” said Cooper. “We look forward to reducing the harm

caused by cigarette smoking by making these products available to adult smokers in Hong Kong.”

However, the company’s enthusiasm was met with staunch objection from the government, which doubted the effectiveness of e-cigarettes and other reduced-risk products as a method for smoking cessation.

“In view of the potential health effects and hazards arising from the use of e-cigarettes and other new tobacco products, the Government proposes to step up the regulation of these products,” the government told *HT*. “In August 2014, the World Health Organization issued a report on e-cigarette which expresses the evidence for the effectiveness of e-cigarette as a method for quitting smoking is limited and is currently considered inconclusive.”

The government also displayed scepticism towards claims of heat-not-burn products being safer than traditional cigarettes.

“The actual long-term health effects from smoking heat-not-burn products to users and bystanders need to be assessed by epidemiological studies, the results of which would not be available for decades,” the government said.

In response to *HT* enquiry regarding the legality of IQOS in Hong Kong, the government said the use of heat-not-burn products also constitutes smoking. Utilising such products in no smoking areas is thus a criminal offence.

“The Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance stipulates that no person shall smoke or carry a lighted cigarette, cigar or pipe in a no smoking area. Any person who smokes (including e-cigarettes or other new tobacco products) in a statutory no smoking area commits an offence and is subject to a fixed penalty of \$1,500,” the government’s reply read.

The government reiterated its hardline tobacco control policy which strongly encourages cessation, including the use of reduced-risk substitutes such as vaporisers and IQOS.

“Smoking cessation is an integral and indispensable part of the Government’s tobacco control policy,” the government stated.

The legality of vaporisers and IQOS is currently a grey area as there is no regulation on the distribution of such products in Hong Kong. While major tobacco companies look forward to the legalisation of such distribution, it is expected that the government will introduce a LegCo bill that will likely involve a complete ban of e-cigarettes and other alternative tobacco products including IQOS within this legislative term.