

Higher taxes show way to cut smoking in Hong Kong

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In her policy address, Carrie Lam proposed a ban on the sale of e-cigarettes in the city, fearing possible harm to health and abuse by youngsters, but one measure has already achieved results

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Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor has taken ownership of the government's decision to abandon a plan to merely regulate e-cigarettes and other new smoking products, the long-term health effects of which are unknown. Instead, Lam said in her policy address she had decided to ban the sale of them altogether in the interests of public health.

Meanwhile, the government continues to allow a regulated legal market in conventional cigarettes, which are known to kill many of those who smoke. That is not to mention the significant disabilities known to be caused by conventional smoking, such as emphysema and circulatory problems, which people live with before dying, and the cost to the economy in lost productivity due to illness and death.

Some authorities see such figures as good reason to ban e-cigarettes because they may entice young people to start smoking even if they may be less harmful; others cite them as a good reason to allow e-cigarettes as likely safer choices. Smokers can still use e-cigarettes or alternatives if they can get them, with less anecdotal or statistical evidence at this stage of the risk to their health. In the end the only sure winner is Big Tobacco, which has invested in heat-not-burn tobacco products in particular.

Why Hong Kong ban on e-cigarettes is wrong – they helped me quit tobacco

The toll and cost of smoking have fallen because its prevalence among those aged 15 and over has fallen to 10 per cent. Lam made it clear she was influenced by the medical and education sectors, parents and individuals who were not convinced that the restricted sale of e-cigarettes and other new products would safeguard public health, and feared the use of them by youngsters could lead to abuse of tobacco and soft drugs. This followed

surveys of primary school pupils that showed a big increase in the number who had tried e-cigarettes. Lam said the public may underestimate the harmful effects, although she did not say what they were. Moreover, there was a lack of evidence to prove they could help smokers quit.

Time may tell if stronger regulation would have led to greater harm reduction in the short term. Meanwhile, the government is targeting a smoking rate of 7.8 per cent by 2025. It should be guided by past experience that higher taxes are the most effective deterrent.

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