Nicotine for vaping should be legalised in Australia to reduce smoking-related disease, say 40 international and Australian experts

Forty leading international and Australian academics and researchers have written to the Therapeutics Goods Administration in support of an application to make low concentrations of nicotine available for use in electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes).

In Australia, it is illegal to sell, buy, possess or use nicotine other than in tobacco or nicotine replacement products, as nicotine is classified in the Poisons Standard as a Schedule 7 ‘dangerous poison’. The consumer advocacy group, New Nicotine Alliance has submitted an application to exempt low concentrations of nicotine for use in electronic cigarettes as a safer alternative to smoking. 1

Professor John Britton, Chair of the Tobacco Advisory Group, Royal College of Physicians (UK) said ‘Nicotine itself is not a significant cause of disease and death. Allowing smokers easier access to nicotine products without the toxins in tobacco smoke could ultimately save millions of lives’.  

‘Lifting the effective ban on low-risk nicotine products will allow Australian smokers to realise the health benefits this approach has already generated in Europe and the United States. I fully endorse this proposal’, he said.

Professor Ann McNeill, from Kings College London and lead author of the Public Health England evidence review on e-cigarettes, 2 commented on the paradox of banning nicotine while allowing widespread sale of tobacco.

‘I just don’t understand the logic of having nicotine in the deadly form of tobacco cigarettes widely available, while nicotine in the much safer form of e-cigarettes is outlawed by the Poison Standard. The current situation in Australia protects the cigarette business, encourages smoking and increases the risk of disease’ she said.

According to Tobacco Treatment Specialist, UNSW Associate Professor Colin Mendelsohn, most of Australia’s 2.8 million smokers want to quit but try and fail repeatedly. 3 For those who are unable or unwilling to quit smoking, switching to an e-cigarette is a much less harmful and cheaper alternative. 4

‘Using an e-cigarette can effectively satisfy the smoker’s need for nicotine as well as providing ‘a smoking experience’ which many smokers miss after quitting and which often leads to relapse’, he said.

‘There is a widespread scientific consensus that the long-term health risks to vapers is unlikely to exceed 5% of the harm from smoking’. 2, 4 On the other hand, up to two out of three Australian smokers will die prematurely from a smoking-related disease if they continue to smoke’, Dr Mendelsohn added. 5

E-cigarettes are used almost exclusively by smokers or recent ex-smokers and principally to reduce the health risks from smoking. 2, 4 Recent data from 2014 shows that 14.6% of Australian smokers are current e-cigarette users. 6

Exempting low concentrations of nicotine for use in e-cigarettes from Schedule 7 would bring it within the jurisdiction of the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC) under The Australian Consumer Law. This would ensure product safety and quality. The current, unregulated black market products would also disappear.  

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1. New Nicotine Alliance
2. Public Health England
3. UNSW Tobacco Treatment Specialist
4. Associate Professor Colin Mendelsohn
5. Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC)
6. Australian Consumer Law
The document supporting the application to amend the Poisons Standard is available at: http://colinmendelsohn.com.au/tga/

Background

Tobacco harm reduction is a strategy to minimise the harm in smokers who are unable or unwilling to quit. The rationale is to provide smokers with an alternative way of getting the nicotine to which they are addicted without the tobacco smoke that causes almost all of the adverse health effects.

Other examples of successful harm reduction strategies include clean needles and syringes to intravenous drug users to reduce the risk of infection and promoting condom use by sex workers.

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid into an aerosol for inhalation, without combustion or smoke. The liquid solution contains water, nicotine (0.3-3.6%), propylene glycol, vegetable glycerine and flavourings.

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References


