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Why Dr Colin Mendelsohn is happy to defy the medical establishment on vapes

We will look back in twenty years and wonder why we didn't embrace the products earlier, he writes in a new book

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By [Dr Colin Mendelsohn](#)

Dr Mendelsohn is a GP with a special interest in smoking cessation. He is a member of the RACGP Expert Advisory Group for smoking cessation guidelines and is the founding chairman of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association.



Dr Colin Mendelsohn.

Here he shares why he is convinced he is on the right side of history when it comes to e-cigarettes, despite the concerns of the Federal Government and AMA.

The following is an extract from Stop Smoking Start Vaping: The Healthy Truth About Vaping, published by Aurora House.

The most rewarding part of general practice for me has been the long-term relationships I developed with patients.

I saw people through good and bad times, got to know their families and developed close professional connections. It was heartbreaking when someone I cared about developed a serious illness.

Smoking kills 21,000 Australians every year and most of these deaths are preventable.

There is a huge human cost behind the statistics. I can recall many sad stories.

I met John soon after I started my practice. He was a hotel manager who had planned to retire with his wife at the age of sixty-five 'up the coast'. They worked hard, putting money aside for their new lifestyle, and purchased a cottage near the water.

John was also a heavy smoker who tried many times to quit, but always seemed to slip back into smoking. John tragically died from a heart attack one week before he was about to move.

Margaret also worked hard all her life as a salesperson and had three daughters. She smoked from the age of eleven and always felt guilty that she couldn't quit, even when pregnant. When she died from lung cancer at the age of sixty, she left a grieving husband and family.

She told me her biggest regret was not being able to grow old with her husband and see her grandchildren grow up.

When I was forty, my father also died from cancer due to smoking. Like me, he was a general practitioner and knew well the risk he was taking. He had a long series of illnesses due to smoking but could not quit. He also knew his grandchildren only briefly.

These stories are not unusual. Up to two out of three Australian smokers will die prematurely from their smoking.

Read more: [A GP guide to vaping and nicotine prescribing](#)

It soon became obvious to me that the greatest impact I could have as a doctor was to help smokers quit. I have spent over thirty years focused on smoking, helping smokers quit, teaching health professionals, writing articles and doing research.

However, even with the most effective treatments available and the best care I could provide, most of my smoking patients could not quit. This was incredibly discouraging to patients, but also to me!

I was supposed to be the smoking expert (I became known as the 'smoking doctor') and yet I was having far more failures than successes. I clearly needed new and effective treatments.

Vaping nicotine arrived in the United Kingdom and United States in 2006/7 and reports started appearing in Australia over the next few years. Smokers were quitting with this new technology. The early evidence was promising, and I wanted to find out more.

In 2015, I went to London, which was the epicentre of research on vaping at the time. I met with several leading researchers and advocates, Peter Hajek, Clive Bates and Martin Dockrell, who confirmed my impression that vaping had huge potential to help smokers.

When I returned to Australia, I wrote my first article on vaping in the *Medical Journal of Australia* titled 'Electronic cigarettes: what can we learn from the UK experience?'.

Even in those early days with less effective devices, the results were encouraging. Vaping was not a silver bullet, but it helped many of my smoking patients quit, notably many who had previously failed with all other treatments.

Vaping let them continue to enjoy the nicotine they craved and replicated the hand-to-mouth action and sensations of smoking, but with only a small fraction of the toxins in smoke.

Since then, there has been a huge amount of research confirming that vaping nicotine is a more effective quitting aid than nicotine replacement therapy (nicotine patches, gums etc.) and is far less harmful than smoking.

Smokers who switch to vaping have significant health improvements, feel and smell better and save thousands of dollars each year.

It is no surprise that vaping is the most popular quitting aid globally. It has been embraced by many governments and leading health and medical organisations around the world.

However, in Australia there is widespread opposition to vaping and most smokers think it is equally or more harmful than smoking.

In 2017, several medical colleagues and I established the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association, a health promotion charity, to educate the public and other stakeholders about vaping.

We naively thought that sharing the evidence would lead to a change in attitudes and policy. How wrong we were! There are other hidden motives driving the opposition to vaping.

We are optimistic that vaping will be accepted as a mainstream quitting aid in time. It will be too late to help John, Margaret or my father, but it has the potential to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australian smokers who cannot quit in other ways.

We will look back in twenty years and wonder why we didn't embrace it earlier.

Dr Mendelsohn's book is available from colinmendelsohn.com.au and online retailers.