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National Smoking & vaping

OPINION

Our vaping delusions have gone up in smoke. The Kiwis have a better idea

A [landmark study published](#) in the journal *Addiction* has revealed that the smoking rate in New Zealand fell twice as fast as in Australia between 2016 and 2023. Over this seven-year period, NZ's adult daily smoking rate plummeted by an astonishing 10 per cent per year, from 14.5 per cent to 6.8 per cent. In contrast, Australia's smoking rate declined by only 5 per cent per year, from 12.2 per cent to 8.3 per cent.



Vape shops have proliferated despite government crackdowns on the importation and sale of vaping products. EDWINA PICKLES

NZ now boasts a lower smoking rate than Australia for the first time. The key difference? They have embraced vaping nicotine as a legitimate harm-reduction tool, while Australia has stuck to an outdated, prohibitionist model. NZ smokers have easy access to a wide range of regulated

vaping products and flavours. Vapes are sold as adult consumer products from licensed retailers – just like cigarettes and alcohol. This aligns with policies in the UK, the US and Canada, where vaping is supported as a harm-reduction strategy rather than seen as a public health threat.

Australia, on the other hand, has taken a highly restrictive, medicalised approach designed to deter youth vaping. Here, [legal vapes are available only through pharmacies](#), often requiring a doctor's prescription. Most flavours are banned. However, enforcement efforts have largely failed to curb the booming black market.

The result? NZ's more pragmatic approach is accelerating the decline in smoking, while Australia's restrictive policies are leaving smokers behind.

One of the most overlooked benefits of vaping is its potential to reduce health disparities. The study found that smoking prevalence in NZ's poorest communities fell three times faster than in Australia (12 per cent per year versus 4 per cent). Similarly, smoking rates among NZ's Maori population declined at almost three times the rate of Indigenous Australians (16 per cent v 6 per cent). This rapid fall wasn't random – it closely correlated with rising vaping rates in these groups.

People from disadvantaged backgrounds have historically had high smoking rates and greater difficulty quitting. But in NZ, they are now quitting smoking even faster than the general population, reversing decades of entrenched inequality in tobacco-related harm.

Youth vaping rose more sharply in NZ, reaching 10 per cent daily vaping in 2023 compared with just 3 per cent in Australia. However, most of this rise occurred before regulations were introduced in 2021. More recent data show youth vaping declined to 8.7 per cent in 2024. While youth vaping remains a concern, it is important to note that it is associated with a decline in youth smoking. In 2023, only 1.2 per cent of youths in NZ smoked daily.

Critics argue that increased youth vaping could lead to a resurgence in smoking, yet the data contradicts this claim. Despite the higher levels of youth vaping in NZ, daily youth smoking has fallen to record lows – just 1.2 per cent in 2023. Rather than acting as a “gateway” to smoking, vaping appears to be diverting young people away from [more harmful, combustible tobacco](#).

Australia's restrictive approach has backfired in another way – by fuelling an out-of-control and increasingly violent black market. Today, [more than 90 per cent](#) of vaping products sold in Australia come from illicit sources with no safety standards and easy access for youth. New Zealand, with its well-regulated retail market, has no significant black market activity.

Vaping is an [effective and widely used aid](#) for quitting smoking. New Zealand's adult daily vaping rate in 2023 was nearly three times higher than in Australia (9.7 per cent v 3.5 per cent) and the decline in smoking rates mirrors this difference. Of course, this study is “cross-sectional”, meaning it tracks population trends rather than following individuals and cannot definitively prove vaping was the cause of the rapid fall in NZ smoking. However, after examining multiple possible explanations, researchers found no other credible factor to explain this dramatic decline.

If vaping is the key driver of this success, as appears likely, then Australia's current approach isn't just failing, it's costing lives.

A more liberal, consumer-driven model – similar to that of NZ – could accelerate the decline in smoking, reduce the health gap for disadvantaged and Indigenous communities and diminish the harms from an unregulated black market. The solution isn't to ban vaping or to try to

restrict it into obscurity. It's to regulate it sensibly – encouraging smokers to switch while implementing reasonable safeguards to protect youth. NZ has shown us what works. It's time we paid attention.

Dr Colin Mendelsohn is an academic, researcher and clinician who has worked in smoking cessation and tobacco harm reduction for more than 40 years. He is a co-author of a [study](#) in the journal *Addiction* comparing smoking and vaping rates in Australia and New Zealand. He has never received funding from e-cigarette or tobacco companies.



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