

TO: The Panel of Health Services of the Legislative Council (via email)

FROM: Life Education Activity Programme (LEAP)

DATE: 22 June 2015

RE: **Legislative Proposals to Strengthen Tobacco Control**

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## Introduction

Life Education Activity Programme (LEAP) welcomes the opportunity to give views on “Legislative Proposals to Strengthen Tobacco Control”. LEAP’s mission is to help prevent substance abuse, particularly drugs, including alcohol and tobacco by providing positive health-based education programmes for young people. Since our establishment in 1994, LEAP has been providing local students with a variety of class-based drug prevention programmes, including tobacco control programmes. Throughout the last 20 years, LEAP has provided programmes to over 1.3 million students and 33,000 parents.

Privileged to work closely with students, LEAP is fortunate enough to have a better understanding of their thoughts and attitude towards smoking. In light of the importance of protecting young students from the harmful effects of smoking, we broadly support the proposed additional tobacco control measures put forward by the Panel on Health Services in LC Paper No. CB(2)1456/14-15(07), including (a) to change the prescribed form of health warning and indication of tar and nicotine yields on packet or retail container of cigarettes and relevant tobacco products; (b) to designate bus interchange facilities located at the tunnel portal areas as statutory NSA; and (c) to regulate electronic cigarettes.

In particular, we would like to comment on two of the proposed measures including health warnings on tobacco products and the regulation of electronic cigarettes.

### (1) Health Warnings on Tobacco Products

Most of the students who attended LEAP’s programmes said they are aware of the graphic health warnings on cigarette packages, and consider it as an effective way to help them gain

more knowledge on the harmful effects of smoking. Reports from countries, such as Canada and Australia, have confirmed health warning pictures on cigarette packages as one of the top three information sources on risks of smoking<sup>1</sup> for long-time smokers. Students have also told us that graphic health warnings are not only easy to understand but also very memorable. The pictorial warnings related to impotence and peripheral vascular diseases, for example, are hard to forget. Yet, they also pointed out that the existing health warnings and pictures have been in use for so long that they don't serve their purposes anymore, implying that these warnings are losing their effectiveness.

In view of the students' comments, LEAP strongly agrees to increasing the number of forms of health warning on cigarette packages from 6 to 12, as well as increasing the area of the graphic health warnings to 85% of the two largest surfaces of the packet along with the addition of a quitline. We believe that the new designs and an increase in health warning size can help make a long-lasting impact on students and weaken their desire to try smoking.

According to research, not only are larger graphic health warnings easier for people to notice and read, they could also carry with them more information on the harmful effects of tobacco. Studies also suggest that the larger the health warnings, the more effective they are in preventing smoking initiation amongst youth<sup>2</sup>. The inclusion of quitline number in health warning has also proved to work. In Australia, for example, the inclusion of quitline number on tobacco packaging has led to a 100% increase in call volume to the quitline.

Many countries have already introduced more stringent measures to regulate tobacco packing, including enlarging the size of the pictorial health warnings<sup>3</sup> when other countries are taking steps to do so<sup>4</sup>. We see no reason why Hong Kong should fall behind with this if we want to protect the health and well-being of our younger generation.

## **(2) Regulating Electronic Cigarettes**

It is not surprising that electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes), which come in various colours and flavours at a very affordable price, can easily arouse the interests of young people. Our educators have come across students who raised questions about this relatively new product as e-cigarettes can easily be found in any shopping malls targeting at young people. With claims like "no nicotine", "safe to use" and "not harmful to the body" which lower students' awareness of their possible hazardous effects, their accessibility definitely trigger students' curiosity towards them.

Even school teachers are alarmed by the ways that e-cigarettes are being promoted to young people. Recently, LEAP received a request from a school to cover more information about e-cigarettes during its tobacco control programme – as it had come to the school’s concern that one of their students had received an e-cigarette as a gift after spending a certain amount of money at a shop. It is evident that e-cigarettes are marketed to young people in unrestrained ways and must be regulated to prevent their further penetration so as to protect our young people from their possible harmful effects. Meanwhile, it is always important to equip students with the ability to make informed and healthy choices.

E-cigarettes are becoming more common in Hong Kong just as many countries are seeing a sharp increase in their use among young people. Even though e-cigarettes are not commonly used by young people in Hong Kong yet, we must be watchful that the situation can change swiftly. Once e-cigarettes become a trend, it is possible that the number of young people using e-cigarettes would rise sharply shortly after a school break such as the summer vacation, for young people are most vulnerable to peer-pressure and information from the cyber world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is highly likely that e-cigarettes could become a gateway to smoking and lead to an increase in youth smoking<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, there are still many uncertainties such as the issues of safety and quality, surrounding e-cigarettes. As laws restricting the production and sale of e-cigarettes are so limited, e-cigarette manufacturers are not obliged to reveal the ingredients and the nicotine content of e-cigarettes. According to the New York Department of Health Bureau of Tobacco Control, the varying nicotine content in e-cigarettes are very high and some samples have been found to contain up to 18mg or more of nicotine<sup>6</sup> which can cause serious damaging effects to the body. Immediate action must therefore be taken to put e-cigarettes under effective control before they further harm our young people with their potential health effects.

To address the concerns raised by teachers and students amid the prevalence of e-cigarettes in Hong Kong, and the potential health risks that e-cigarettes may pose on young people, we support measures to prohibit import, distribution, and sale of e-cigarettes in order to protect young people from exposure to their products. LEAP also believes that it is essential to do more in educating the community with a view to help young people understand and be aware of the effects and risks of e-cigarettes.

## Conclusions

LEAP earnestly hopes that the Government can introduce more stringent tobacco control measures as soon as possible by a) to change the prescribed form of health warning and indication of tar and nicotine yields on packet or retail container of cigarettes and relevant tobacco products; (b) to designate bus interchange facilities located at the tunnel portal areas as statutory NSA; and (c) to regulate electronic cigarettes. Among the primary and secondary students reached by LEAP, many agreed that the warning images on tobacco products can leave a strong impression; however, in order to maintain and strengthen the warning effects, there is a need to modify the contents and sizes of these images, as well as to include more information such as smoking cessation hotlines. At the same time, both teachers and students are concerned about young people being targeted as market of e-cigarettes. In order to protect students from being misled by e-cigarettes companies and turning into smokers, we support the Government's proposal of a complete prohibition on electronic cigarettes. Furthermore, we hope that the Government would expand its tobacco control efforts in education by actively promoting a healthy lifestyle so as to protect the health of the general public and young people.

## References:

- <sup>1</sup>Tobacco Control. "Effectiveness of cigarette warning label in informing smokers about the risks of smoking: findings from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey". 2006. [http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/15/suppl\\_3/iii19.full.pdf+html](http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/15/suppl_3/iii19.full.pdf+html)
- <sup>2</sup>Tobacco free kids (TCFK). "Tobacco warning labels: evidence of effectiveness"  
<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0325.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup>Canadian Cancer Society (CCC). "Cigarette Package Health Warnings: International Status Report". Fourth Edition. October 2014.  
[http://global.tobaccofreekids.org/files/pdfs/en/WL\\_status\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://global.tobaccofreekids.org/files/pdfs/en/WL_status_report_en.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup>World No Tobacco Day 2015, May 31: The Union calls for international solidarity on tobacco packaging laws  
[http://www.theunion.org/news-centre/press-releases/document/World-No-Tobacco-Day-2015-PR-general\\_final.pdf](http://www.theunion.org/news-centre/press-releases/document/World-No-Tobacco-Day-2015-PR-general_final.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup>World Health Organization  
<http://www.who.int/nmh/events/2014/backgrounder-e-cigarettes/en/>
- <sup>6</sup>CDC (2014) The Facts About Electronic Cigarettes  
[http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/tobacco/documents/Ecigarette\\_factsheet.pdf](http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/tobacco/documents/Ecigarette_factsheet.pdf)