

Submission from Dr Phoenix MO Kit-han

I am writing to support the call to prohibit the import, manufacture, sale, distribution and advertisement of alternative smoking products, including e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn tobacco in Hong Kong for the following reasons:

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), all forms of tobacco, including e-cigarettes, HNB tobacco, and other new smoking products, are inherently toxic and harmful. They contain detrimental and carcinogenic substances commonly found in traditional cigarettes, including nicotine, volatile organic compound (VOC), carbon monoxide (CO) and carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). These chemicals and toxins may cause serious health problems such as cancer and heart disease, and respiratory diseases. The Secondary School Smoking Survey 2012/13 conducted by the School of Public Health of the University of Hong Kong found that e-cigarette users were more likely to have respiratory symptoms.

It has been claimed that alternative smoking products might offer existing cigarette smokers a less harmful option or a tool for smoking cessation. However, according to the World Health Organization, the evidence of alternative smoking produces on smoking cessation is limited and inconclusive. A nationally representative probability-based cross-sectional survey of 1836 current or recently former adult smokers in the U.S. found that although alternative tobacco product use was associated with having made a quit attempt, use of such products was not associated with successful quit attempts. (Popova & Ling, 2013). Another longitudinal study among cigarette and marijuana youth users found that e-cigarette use in the past year was not associated with any change in their traditional cigarette and marijuana use in the subsequent year. E-cigarette use did not appear to contribute to cessation of cigarette use. (Unger, Soto, & Leventhal, 2016). Unsubstantiated claims that alternative smoking products would facilitate smoking cessation should be prohibited.

The biggest concern over alternative tobacco products was the possibility that it might encourage youth and non-smokers to smoke. Most of the alternative tobacco products are marketed as trendy items targeted to non-smokers and youth. According to the Tobacco Control Policy-related Survey 2015 conducted by COSH, the main reasons for e-cigarettes were curiosity and fashionable, instead of aiding smoking cessation. One longitudinal study among college students in the U.S. found that trying e-cigarettes during college did not deter cigarette smoking but on the contrary, may have contributed to continued smoking (Sutfin et al., 2015). Another longitudinal study among Hispanic youth also found that e-cigarette use was associated with cigarette and marijuana use one year later (Unger et al., 2016). Alternative tobacco products might provide individuals a gateway to smoking.

Opponents to the ban might argue that a regulatory approach, rather than a strict ban to alternative tobacco products, to be more appropriate. However, experiences from other countries showed that regulatory approach on alternative tobacco products have not been effective in curbing the escalating smoking prevalence among the youth. For example, figures from the U.S. reported that e-cigarette use among high school students has increased exponentially from 1.5% in 2011 to 20.8% in 2018 (US CDC). According to the information of the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention,

over 3 million high school students have been using e-cigarettes in 2018. Local statistics have also reported an increasing prevalence of use of alternative smoking products. According to the survey conducted by the School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong, ever use of e-cigarettes among primary 2 to primary 4 students increased from 2.9% in 2016-2017 to 4.5% in 2017-2018. To protect the health of the general public, and more importantly, to stop the alternative tobacco products from becoming a trend among youth in Hong Kong, there is an urgent need to ban all alternative tobacco products in the country.