

YOUTH VAPING RATES

Industry reacts to the tobacco control bill

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WHILE a recent study by the University of Cape Town (UCT) has sounded the alarm about the alarming levels of vape usage among teens, the industry has sought to reassure that they are taking the matter seriously, but are also concerned about how vaping is viewed in the Tobacco Products & Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill.

The Health Department has previously said that, due to tobacco use remaining one of the leading causes of preventable death and disease worldwide, "the government has proposed legislation on Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems as part of its efforts to enforce strong tobacco control policies in South Africa".

The department explained that the Bill aims not only to protect current and future generations from the harms of tobacco but also to promote health equity and sustainable development.

"Therefore, the department calls upon all sectors, including health professionals, educators, policymakers, and communities, to unite in support of effective tobacco control."

Recently, vaping has been in the spotlight, after a UCT study sounded the alarm on vaping rates among South African teens, urging the swift enactment of the Tobacco Products & Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill to curb what they warn could become a full-blown national epidemic.

Affinity Health said that the difference is that cigarettes burn tobacco and release more than 7000 chemicals, including tar, carbon monoxide, and arsenic, many of which are toxic and carcinogenic.

The study found that nearly 17% of surveyed learners currently use vapes:



ACCORDING to Affinity Health, while vaping may contain fewer known toxins than cigarettes, it is not safe, especially for teens, pregnant women, and people with chronic conditions. | Supplied

among them, 38.3% vape daily, over 50% of current users vape more than four days a week, and 88% of current vapers reported using products containing nicotine.

The study surveyed 25000 pupils across 52 fee-paying high schools nationwide to assess the prevalence, drivers, and addictive behaviours linked to vaping among teenagers.

The researchers uncovered startling trends using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data.

"In South Africa, where tobacco control has made strides, the rapid rise in vaping among adolescents is a new public health challenge. We were further driven by global alarm bells, like the World Health Organization's

2023 warning about e-cigarette promotion targeting the youth, as well as local gaps in knowledge," said co-author Samantha Filby.

Last week, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Health heard a presentation from Asanda Gcoyi, CEO of the Vapour Products Association of South Africa (VPASA), where she delivered the industry's oral submission regarding the proposed Tobacco Control Bill.

Gcoyi stated that their overall concern with the Bill is that smokers are not at the centre of the policy proposal, and that there is a lack of differentiation in how vaping is treated.

By suggesting comparable measurements, she claimed that they were the same as tobacco, despite scientific evidence showing that they fall into two distinct risk categories.

She also highlighted that harm is not equal, and that the 'harm is harm' mantra has no place in public health policy.

Gcoyi informed the committee that there is a lot of proxy buying occurring and that she witnessed it herself, how adults are buying on behalf of a minor.

"We've spent a lot of time developing the guidelines, and you can take some of the guidelines. We need stronger controls and penalties for people who do not abide by the guidelines."

Gcoyi also wanted to dispel the notion that banning disposable vapes will eradicate youth vaping.

Founder and Director of Quit Like Sweden (QLS), Suely Castro, an organisation which seeks to tout alternatives to traditional tobacco control and highlight methods that support adult smokers in transitioning to safer alternatives, has also weighed in.

Castro said the UCT study findings highlight an important issue that requires urgent and nuanced regulatory attention, and that the QLS fully acknowledges the legitimate concerns surrounding underage vaping.

"The QLS supports progressive, evidence-based regulation that accomplishes two things simultaneously: protects youth and empowers adults. Sweden's model, based on what we refer to as the 'three As': accessibility, acceptability, and affordability, ensures safer alternatives are available for adult smokers while maintaining tight control over youth access.

"Such an approach avoids the pitfalls of prohibition while addressing both public health and economic concerns."

Castro said that South Africa's Bill should be built on a foundation of risk-proportionate regulation, which looks at a differentiated regulation for products based on relative risk; support for adult smokers by ensuring safer alternatives remain acceptable, accessible, and affordable; and targeted youth protections such as guidelines on descriptors (avoiding overly childish language), enforcement of age restriction, and responsible advertising and marketing.

Ultimately, judging by Deputy Health Minister Dr Joe Phaahla's words on World No-Tobacco Day earlier in June, he remains confident that the Bill will be ultimately passed, despite those who are also preaching harm-reduction.

Phaahla said the rise in teen vaping is alarming, fuelling a new generation of nicotine addiction.

"We must remember that every life lost through tobacco is indeed preventable. We don't need it in our bodies. Nicotine does not present any value..."

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