

MARKING A FIVE-YEAR MILESTONE

A reflection on the five-year journey of the VAPOUR PRODUCTS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA and a look at its future

Whether fielding questions on youth access to vapour products or discussing evidence-backed research on vaping as a harm-reduced alternative to smoking, Asanda Gcoyi, chief executive of the Vapour Products Association of South Africa (VPASA), remains poised and unflappable. Gcoyi has spent the past five years striving to bridge the knowledge gap surrounding vaping and its potential role in tobacco harm reduction in South Africa.

Throughout Gcoyi's tenure, VPASA has navigated complex conversations in the country's public health landscape. As the Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill works its way through parliament, a look back reveals the significant milestones the organisation has achieved under her leadership.

COMBATTING MISCONCEPTIONS THROUGH EDUCATION

VPASA's mission has always been to educate smokers and the public about vaping. VPASA has actively advocated for smokers to switch to vaping given the scientific evidence that shows vaping's role as a harm-reduced alternative to smoking.

Yet Gcoyi acknowledges that when she first joined the organisation, the lack of public understanding about vaping was and in many ways still is a significant challenge. Many people equate vaping with smoking, leading to misconceptions that it could be as dangerous, if not more so, than smoking.

"We recognised there were a lot of misconceptions," says Gcoyi. "Due to information gaps in the public domain, many smokers were left to figure things out for

themselves without any concerted effort by organised industry or anti-smoking advocates to inform them they could reduce their harm exposure from the toxicants found in tobacco smoke simply by switching to vaping."

To address this, VPASA embarked on a multipronged educational campaign. Gcoyi's understanding of the importance and the use of various media channels to reach a diverse

audience meant public relations and social media became a crucial tool for disseminating information. Television and radio interviews, with community radio taking centre stage more recently, provided a platform to reach demographics that might not be active on social media. The targeted content aimed to educate the public on the core differences between vaping and smoking.

CO-CREATING CONSUMER UNDERSTANDING

VPASA's commitment to consumer education extends beyond its own initiatives with the organisation giving its members opportunities to both learn and share their knowledge of and experiences with vapour products.

Gcoyi highlights an initiative by Vaping Saved My Life (VSML), a consumer advocacy group focused on providing practical information to consumers, empowering them to make informed choices and learn through real experiences.

"VSLM did a study last year — a social experiment — of a number of smokers on a journey to quit smoking," explains Gcoyi. "The study became an educational tool with the smokers chronicling their day-to-day experiences."

This real-world experiment documented the experiences of several smokers transitioning to vaping. Their resulting report offered valuable insights into the challenges faced by those seeking to quit smoking and the role vaping could play in their journeys.

Beyond its digital channels, partnering with local newspapers further allows VPASA to leverage the credibility and reach of traditional media. Informative write-ups on the differences between vaping and smoking provide consumers with a trusted source of information, complementing

GCOYI HAS SPENT THE PAST FIVE YEARS STRIVING TO BRIDGE THE KNOWLEDGE GAP SURROUNDING VAPING AND ITS POTENTIAL ROLE IN TOBACCO HARM REDUCTION IN SOUTH AFRICA.



Asanda Gcoyi

VAPOUR PRODUCTS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA **ADVERTORIAL**

ABOUT VPASA

Vapour Products Association of South Africa (VPASA) represents manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers of smoke-free vapour products in South Africa. We have come together to work with government and other stakeholders to develop legal regulations and standards for our industry and to ensure that consumers have access to all available information about vapour products.

As the united voice for the vapour products industry and a growing contributor to the South African economy, we are committed to ensure quality and safety in all our members' products and marketing, and seek to contribute to the growing body of empirical evidence that our products represent a safer alternative to smoking and have the potential to save millions of lives.

operating in it, who stick around as regulations are implemented, will be the ones in it for the long haul."

A LEGACY OF EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

With Gcoyi at its helm since 2019, VPASA has made significant strides in educating the South African public about vaping. Through targeted campaigns, collaborations and engagement with traditional media, the team has challenged misconceptions and provided consumers and the public at large with valuable information.

As regulations conversations continue, VPASA's focus on responsible practices positions the organisation as a key player in shaping the future of the vapour products industry in South Africa. There are undoubtedly challenges ahead, particularly regarding affordable access. Yet VPASA's commitment to harm reduction and consumer education has laid the groundwork for navigating the complexities that lie ahead. ■

VPASA's efforts on social media and its website.

The organisation has also initiated collaborations and discussions with the Advertising Regulatory Board and the South African Bureau of Standards to introduce vapour product advertising guidelines and standards, respectively. These are particularly designed to promote responsible industry practices and limit the appeal of products to nonsmokers, especially the youth.

At a time when the legislative process has been slow, the industry has seized the initiative to avoid unscrupulous practices and misleading communication about vaping.

BEYOND EDUCATION: AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Gcoyi acknowledges that VPASA's achievements need to be viewed in the context of ongoing challenges. One significant hurdle is the affordability of vapour products when compared to the illicit cigarettes that are prevalent in South Africa, especially in lower-income communities. As a result, many nicotine addicts struggle to switch to vaping as a tool in the journey to quit smoking. This means more affluent South Africans have a higher chance of switching to vaping, thus reducing their harm exposure.

Her biggest hope when the time comes for her to step down is that her successor will be someone who appreciates the challenges in terms of addiction, affordability and accessibility at the community level. "I hope everyone who gets the privilege of working in this space will be prompted to drive making these products affordable."

GCOYI EMPHASISES THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH POLICYMAKERS TO ENSURE REGULATIONS PRIORITISE PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE GROWTH OF THE INDUSTRY.

THE LOOMING REGULATIONS

VPASA has maintained its commitment to its core principles of harm reduction and responsible sale, distribution and use of vapour products. To this end, Gcoyi emphasises the importance of working with policymakers to ensure regulations prioritise public health and the growth of the industry. Over the past five years, she and her team have lobbied the government and played key roles in the public hearing process for the Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill.

The looming regulations, including excise tax, present a complex issue, but VPASA, she says, is steadfast in its belief that responsible practices, access and affordability must be recognised as key concerns. The industry will need to adapt to the evolving regulatory landscape with stricter regulations weeding out less reputable companies that prioritise profit over responsible practices.

"The law will be enforced and the next five years will be a good period for consumers. Responsible marketing and age restrictions are important for sustainability. The industry will become more professional and those



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