

OPINION

OPINION: We must act to curb youth vaping



Kerrie Luck writes: 'E-cigarettes have the potential to undo decades of work in reducing nicotine addiction and tobacco use in our province.'

Photo: Brian Thompson/Postmedia News

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Kerrie Luck | Commentary

New Brunswick has made noteworthy progress in the war on tobacco over the past few years, bringing tobacco use prevalence from the highest in the country to one below the national average. ~~Moncton Saint John Fredericton Miramichi Woodstock Bathurst Sussex~~ These successes have been driven by the forward thinking of our New Brunswick government and proactive evidence-based approaches, including taxation, banning flavoured tobacco, increasing cessation supports and the trend-setting amendments to smoke-free places legislation.

Unfortunately, while we were working hard to bring our tobacco use rates to an all-time low, there was a new problem lurking – electronic cigarettes. When these devices were initially introduced to Canada, they were touted as an alternative to smoking cigarettes. While these devices do not have any medical support for smoking cessation, some feel these devices can be effective for cessation and a “safer” alternative to smoking combustible tobacco. (Please note, I said “safer,” not safe).

Today, the issue we all need to be concerned about is the new and unforeseen epidemic of children and youth, who have never used tobacco, using these products.

A recent study published in the British Medical Journal, conducted by Professor David Hammond, found a 74 per cent increase in vaping among youth aged 16 to 19 in Canada from 2017 to 2018. The 2018-19 Student Wellness Survey (Grades 6 to 12) by the New Brunswick Health Council reported that 43 per cent of high school students have reported trying e-cigarettes.

Not only are kids more likely to try e-cigarettes, more are becoming regular users of e-cigarettes. Of 357 students surveyed in Grades 9 to 12, 27 per cent identified as frequent users of e-cigarettes.

Electronic cigarettes were regulated in Canada in May 2018. Luckily, New Brunswick saw fit to impose restrictions on e-cigarettes, such as banning retail displays and promotion,

creating a minimum age of 19 to purchase, and prohibiting use where smoking is banned.

While many thought these measures would be enough to keep these devices out of the hands of children, we were sadly mistaken. The Surgeon General of the United States Public Health Service, Dr. Jerome M. Adams, has described e-cigarette use as an epidemic of great concern and has called for immediate action, emphasizing the importance of “protecting our children from a lifetime of nicotine addiction and associated health risks.”

The recent surge in e-cigarette use among youth has been fuelled by appealing yummy flavours, social media and newer discreet styles of e-cigarettes. While Europe has regulated the maximum amount of nicotine in e-cigarettes at 20 mg/ml, in Canada you can buy devices that contain as much as 58 mg/ml of nicotine. That means one e-cigarette cartridge could contain as much nicotine as a full pack of cigarettes.

According to Health Canada, vaping can lead to nicotine addiction, with children and youth being especially susceptible. Nicotine can affect memory and concentration and alter teen brain development. Vaping can cause lung damage by exposing youth to harmful chemicals like formaldehyde, acrolein and metals/contaminants like nickel, tin and aluminum. The long-term health impacts of vaping are still unknown.

Both federally and provincially, we need stronger regulations on e-cigarettes to protect our children from a lifetime of nicotine addiction and potential health consequences. Prince Edward Island just passed legislation to raise the legal vaping and smoking minimum age from 19 to 21, as well as banning the sale of some flavouring agents and limiting the sale of electronic smoking devices to tobacco shops.

Other provinces are proposing the regulation of nicotine content and flavours, new labelling requirements, restrictions on sales and advertising, increasing sales tax on vaping products,

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enhanced prevention and cessation supports for schools and youth, and enhanced compliance and enforcement.

The time to act is now. Let's learn from our past experience in our fight against tobacco. E-cigarettes have the potential to undo decades of work in reducing nicotine addiction and tobacco use in our province.

Let's ensure we foster an environment to support healthy choices and decrease the potential threats to children's long-term health. These proposed actions and legislative changes will still allow access for tobacco users who wish to use e-cigarettes for cessation, or as a form of harm reduction, while at the same time de-normalizing e-cigarettes to youth and ensure the potential for nicotine addiction is mitigated.

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 Published a month ago



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