

Other countries are regulating smoking in homes and Singapore should, too

Combatting second-hand smoke includes bans and designated smoking points

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For *The Straits Times*

Singapore has made a commendable effort to stop people from smoking in public places and to reduce smoking prevalence with measures such as taxation and plain packaging.

Despite this, the issue of second-hand smoke is not going away any time soon. In a city as densely populated as Singapore, it does not take many smokers to expose a lot of people.

A recent study in the journal *Indoor Air* found that, though only 6 per cent of Singaporeans smoke in their homes, almost 60 per cent are exposed to second-hand smoke from a neighbour. This means that, for every person that lights up in their home, on average 10 neighbours are exposed.

The study also found that the vast majority (88 per cent) of Singaporeans were regularly exposed to second-hand smoke – a well-established cause of lung cancer, heart disease and asthma, among others – despite the many smoking bans covering public indoor and outdoor places.

What might be the best way to properly protect people?

One solution is to regulate smoking, even in Housing Board flats,

stopping short of banning it completely.

Smoking is allowed inside one's HDB flat, but not outside it. Areas such as common corridors, stairwells, staircase landings and void decks are listed as non-smoking areas under the Smoking (Prohibition in Certain Places) Act, which is administered by the National Environment Agency (NEA).

How do other countries deal with it?

Smoking in multi-unit housing is already banned by law in parts of the United States, Canada and New Zealand. These bans were a result of initiatives to protect residents' right to live in a smoke-free home and to reduce the fire risk and maintenance costs to building owners.

In the US, all public housing went smoke-free in 2018, protecting about two million residents, including 760,000 children. In addition, 76 municipalities in California have banned smoking in private multi-unit housing.

Studies from Colorado, Wisconsin and Oregon show that, though these bans did not get rid of smoking completely, they significantly reduced second-hand smoke exposure and were well received by residents. Smokers benefited too, as more ended up quitting or reducing their consumption following the ban.

The Canadian provinces of Waterloo, Yukon and Saskatchewan have also banned smoking in multi-unit housing. However, existing tenants were exempted from the ban. In the cities of Christchurch and Wellington in New Zealand, smoking in public multi-unit housing is being phased out in a similar way.

In Waterloo and Yukon, residents' support increased and more



A designated smoking point in Yishun. A recent study found that 88 per cent of Singaporeans were regularly exposed to second-hand smoke, despite the many smoking bans covering public indoor and outdoor places. ST FILE PHOTO

smokers quit or reduced their consumption following the ban. However, the exemption for existing tenants made enforcement more challenging.

A similar ban could work in the Singapore context.

The success of such a measure depends partly on whether people are ready to accept it. The Indoor Air study suggests that they are, as a vast majority (78 per cent) of Singaporeans "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that apartment blocks in Singapore should be completely smoke-free.

In addition, a sizeable proportion of smokers already take steps to protect others by smoking outside their homes.

Based on the experience in Can-

ada, a complete smoking ban might be more practical than a ban which covers only certain units, or only certain parts of the building such as the balcony and window.

Other places have revised their laws to make it easier for building owners to set and enforce smoke-free rules.

In the Australian territories of New South Wales and Victoria, model by-laws require residents to avoid smoking in areas where their second-hand smoke can enter neighbouring units. In Finland, the national tobacco law allows housing corporations to ban smoking on balconies.

In Singapore, a number of condominiums have passed by-laws that regulate smoking inside units.

However, condos can pass such a by-law only with a 75 per cent vote, and enforcing the by-law, for instance with a substantial fine, remains a challenge.

A national law which explicitly permits condos to set and enforce no-smoking rules would remove some of these barriers.

A softer approach could be setting up designated smoking points, such as the smoking shelters in HDB estates in Nee Soon South and Clementi, coupled with campaigns to encourage smokers to smoke in a socially responsible manner.

The main advantage is that this would be less coercive than regulation.

However, a recent study, publish-

ed in *BMC Public Health*, found that smokers and non-smokers in Singapore have very different ideas on what "socially responsible smoking" entails in practice.

Some smokers interpreted this as simply complying with no-smoking rules, and did not believe their second-hand smoke had much impact on the mental and physical well-being of others.

Another challenge with such campaigns is that they have not historically worked.

In the 1990s, tobacco companies funded "mutual tolerance" campaigns to avoid smoking bans, but it was only when smoking was banned that people were finally protected from second-hand smoke.

These measures are, however, useful when coupled with regulation, as people tend to be more receptive to restrictions when they understand the rationale behind them and when given alternatives.

Smoke-free environments are already the norm in public places.

They are also the norm in certain residential settings, such as prisons and mental health institutions, to protect the health of staff and other residents. This applies not only in Singapore, but in many other countries as well.

If a smoke-free environment is the norm outside the home, it seems reasonable to assume it should be a norm inside the home as well.

Perhaps the idea of regulating smoking in HDB and condo units is not so unreasonable or impractical after all.

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