

Singapore should ban cigarettes for those born after 2010

The elusive goal of a tobacco-free Republic means fresh thinking to stem smoking might be needed

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Quitting smoking may be an item in many smokers' New Year's resolutions, but it is notoriously difficult to do. Yet, what if we could prevent people from starting the habit to begin with?

Last week, New Zealand passed sweeping anti-smoking laws, including banning the sale of tobacco to anyone born in or after 2009. Malaysia introduced a similar Bill earlier in 2022 to prevent those born in or after 2007 from ever picking up a cigarette.

If the laws in New Zealand and the Bill in Malaysia are successful, young people in those countries could be part of the first tobacco-free generation (TFG) of our time.

SMOKING KILLS

The harmful effects of smoking are well known. Every year, tobacco kills more than eight million people globally. In Singapore, six people die prematurely each day from smoking-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease and stroke.

Yet, one in 10 Singaporeans still smokes, according to the 2020 National Population Health Survey. If we know smoking harms our health and the health of those around us, why do we still light up?

Nearly nine in 10 adults who smoke daily first try smoking by the age of 18, when they are most susceptible to peer pressure and social cues that suggest smoking is a rite of passage into adulthood, according to the United States Surgeon-General's report from the Department of Health and Human Services. Ninety-nine per cent of smokers first try smoking by the age of 26.

The report concluded that adolescence is the critical stage when smokers develop an addiction, a time when most begin to experiment with smoking and form attitudes and beliefs about tobacco. And once you're hooked, it's hard to kick the habit. Most adult smokers want to or have tried to quit, but as nicotine is highly addictive, very few do so successfully.

Put simply, those who don't smoke in their youth won't pick up the habit.



Singapore has enjoyed much success in tobacco control efforts, with smoking rates declining from 18.3 per cent in 1992 to today's 10.1 per cent. But single-digit percentage smoking rates remain stubbornly out of reach, say the writers. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

A TOBACCO-FREE GENERATION

First mooted in Singapore in 2010 by Dr Koong Heng Nung – a surgeon who specialises in thoracic surgery and is the founding director of non-profit organisation Tobacco-Free Generation International – this pioneering concept of a TFG never won policy support locally, with the Government preferring to employ other strategies to realise the 1986 National Smoking Control Programme's vision of a "nation of non-smokers".

Singapore has enjoyed much success in tobacco control efforts, with smoking rates declining from 18.3 per cent in 1992 to today's 10.1 per cent. Effective policy formulation and enforcement around the World Health Organisation's recommended measures – a suite of recommendations focusing on surveillance, taxation, legislation, easy access to cessation services and community partnerships and public education – have created impressive results.

The ground-breaking Tobacco (Control of Advertisements and Sale) Act passed in 1993 greatly restricts the sale and promotion of tobacco products, with further curbs on packaging and branding

rolled out in the years after and the minimum legal age for smoking raised.

Since the 1970s, Singapore has also made significant progress through the Health Promotion Board's programmes in preventing young people from starting and assisting smokers in quitting smoking. Today, the "I Quit" public campaign has encouraged many Singaporeans to kick the habit.

In fact, Singapore has been recognised as an Asean leader in tobacco taxation and was in 2004 considered to be the "most hostile environment" in the world to smoking by University of Sydney researchers for its ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Singapore also became the first Asian country to introduce graphic health warnings on all tobacco products.

However, the decline in smoking rates hit a plateau, with the rate hovering at 12.6 per cent in 2004, 13.3 per cent in 2013 and 12 per cent in 2017. These official statistics, while including responses to queries on vapes, may also not paint a full picture of tobacco use, given that vaping and other alternate forms of nicotine consumption are illegal here and respondents may be

hesitant to reply truthfully.

The overall picture is clear: Despite Singapore's efforts, it is barely sustaining the decline in smoking rates and single-digit percentage smoking prevalence remains stubbornly out of reach.

TOWARDS A TOBACCO-FREE GENERATION IN SINGAPORE

As public health doctors, we see this impasse as making bolder thinking imperative in the pursuit of realising a smoke-free country and a tobacco-free generation. But what should guide public policy and legislation in advancing towards this goal?

The litmus test of any legislation generally involves four questions: First, does it address the problem at hand and drive the desired societal outcomes? Second, are the downsides limited as much as possible with a clear net benefit to Singapore? Third, does it unfairly target any specific population? Fourth, can the legislation be implemented practically and cost-effectively?

There is good justification for active government intervention and strong state paternalism, given the ease of picking up smoking, the desire among smokers to kick the habit and the

struggles they face in giving it up. The most logical next step would be for legal measures to prevent young people from ever trying tobacco.

This could take the form of a next-generation tobacco ban, through an amendment to the Tobacco Act for those born after 2010, following the precedent set by Malaysia and New Zealand. The advantage of this over raising the minimum legal age is that it would dispel any rite-of-passage expectations and set the narrative that we never want our children to start smoking.

Practically, such a ban also ensures that access to cigarettes remains illicit permanently, as opposed to having a temporary state of difficult access until one attains the minimum legal age. The announcement of this legislative amendment could be made in 2023, with ample time before the identified cohorts of young people come of age, to allow a societal shift in mindset and for the Government to pass necessary amendments and prepare appropriate enforcement measures.

The autonomy of current smokers will be preserved as the legislation targets only young people with no opportunity to

smoke and who are free from the addictive power of nicotine.

In March, the Government announced the introduction of mandated codes of conduct requiring online platforms to have robust systems in place to minimise the exposure of children and young people to harmful content. We believe many parents in Singapore would support government action to also protect their children from the pull of smoking. Once these children reach adulthood as non-smokers, the desire to start smoking would be minimal, as decades of research have shown.

On the policy front, achieving a tobacco endgame, generally defined as a smoking prevalence of 5 per cent or less, would be a godsend for population health and mitigate fiscal pressures on Singapore's healthcare system arising from smoking-related illnesses.

Still, this step towards a TFG will require attention to thoughtful implementation. It could encourage illicit tobacco trade and further strain Customs resources. The legislation will also require a societal mindset shift to support the TFG and people who might be negatively affected by the ban. Minimarts and sundry stores that depend on tobacco sales for income could be supported in shifting to sell other kinds of products.

This ban on cigarettes for young people is also no stand-alone silver bullet when cosmopolitan Singapore youth travel and study outside Singapore, where they will be exposed to tobacco. Cigarettes and other sources of nicotine are readily available in neighbouring countries, with ample opportunities for young people to be introduced to tobacco abroad and through popular media.

Public education will be needed to counter unavoidable exposure to smoking and stem the narrative that "the forbidden fruit is sweetest". The public narrative reinforcing the unappealing nature of smoking and smokers needs to be carefully constructed to avoid inadvertently tempting Singaporean youth into experimenting with what can be seen as an exotic lifestyle.

Any move towards TFG legislation and enforcement will be a bumpy road, but the road less taken can make all the difference.

Famed anthropologist Margaret Mead once commented that nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. TFG, as conceptualised by Singapore more than a decade ago and now embraced by Malaysia and New Zealand, has been described as "liberating" and "game-changing".

The endgame is in sight within a generation here in Singapore. We are failing our children if we don't seize this opportunity.

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