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 much more difficult to do. Yet, what if we could ease the process of starting the habit to begin with?

Last year, 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, we see people die prematurely from smoking-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke.

Yet, one in 10 Singaporeans still smoke. In the 2017 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 have started 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 Services. Ninety-nine per cent of smokers first try smoking by the age of 26.

The report concluded that adolescence is the critical stage where the habit of smoking develops, a time when most begin experimenting with smoking and form attitudes and beliefs about tobacco. And once you have hooked, it’s hard to kick the habit.

Most adult smokers 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.

A TOBACCO-FREE GENERATION

First mooted in Singapore in 2000 by Dr Kong Heng Heng – a surgeon who specializes 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 tackle the 1996 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 18.8 per cent in 1992 to today’s 9.4 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 Sales) Act passed in 1993 greatly restricts the sale and promotion of tobacco products, with further curbs on packaging and branding outlawed in the years after and the minimum legal age for smoking raised.

Since the 1990s, Singapore has also made significant progress through the Health Promotion Board’s programmes in preventing young people from starting and avoiding smokers in quitting smoking. Today, the “I Quit” public campaign has encouraged many Singaporeans to kick the habit.

In fact, Singapore has been recognized 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, 13.1 per cent in 2013 and 12 per cent in 2015. These official statistics, while including responses to questions on vapours, may also not paint a full picture of tobacco use, given that vaping and other alternative 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 bold thinking imperative in the pursuit of realizing 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 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 non-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 stigma or over-representing the narrative that “the forbidden fruit is sweeter.” The public narrative reinforces the appealing nature of smoking and smokers, and the appeal is strong to avoid inadvertently tempting young people to experiment with what can be seen as an equally liberating.

Any move towards TFG legislation and enforcement will be too long for some and too little for others.

Famed anthropologist Margaret Mead once commented that nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. TFG, as conceptualized 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 do not seize this opportunity.