

Let's get tough and think out of the box to root out vaping

The penalties need to be ramped up. We can also use technology to track down the users and suppliers of e-cigarettes.

Teo Yik Ying

It is time to take serious action against vaping, which has been on the rise despite Singapore's zero tolerance towards e-cigarettes.

The Ministry of Health made it clear during the recent Committee of Supply debate that it will be stepping up the penalties associated with vaping-related offences.

At the moment, anyone caught with an e-vaporiser can be fined up to \$2,000. Anyone caught selling or distributing any vaping products for the first time can be fined up to \$10,000, be imprisoned for up to six months, or both. The penalty can potentially double for those caught repeatedly.

But Singapore has seen a steady increase in vape-related activities despite these penalties. That is evident in both the surge of individuals apprehended for vaping and the escalating cases of offenders nabbed for illicitly importing vaping products.

Official statistics from the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) underscore this trend, revealing a fourfold increase in the number of individuals caught vaping in 2023 compared with 2020.

Clearly, the penalties and enforcement actions that we have currently are insufficient to stem the tide of this burgeoning public health problem.

Worryingly, we are even seeing new "energy sticks" inhalers that are marketed as providing a healthy and natural source of

energy boost. In fact, they are similar in design to illegal e-vaporisers, suggesting an attempt to normalise the perception of inhalers and potentially serve as a gateway to vaping.

It is thus timely that Singapore reviews its regulatory and enforcement policies against the use, import, sale and distribution of e-vaporisers and illicit inhalers. In fact, we must be more daring and innovative in order to successfully tackle the problem.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

It's obvious we need to sharply ramp up the penalties for the illegal sale or distribution of vaping products and we should use technology to nab the culprits.

The present penalties are clearly not sufficient to deter individuals and criminal syndicates from selling vaping products in the black market.

News reports suggest that even some individual sellers in Singapore had amassed vaping products worth tens of thousands of dollars, while syndicate groups have been caught with products worth millions of dollars.

The mere fact that there is an increasing number of standalone sellers who are willing to take the risk to import and redistribute vaping products in Singapore suggests the profit-to-risk ratio is lucrative enough.

Given that it is not easy to detect vaping products being

carried or mailed, it is no wonder people look to the illegal sale and distribution of these products to make a quick buck.

We also need to be smarter at finding the people who vape, and subsequently the people who sell them vaping products.

It can be done. Singapore rolled out widespread sewage testing to detect Covid-19 viral fragments in order to locate the presence of infected people. Perhaps it is time to consider deploying the same technology in places such as schools, hostels and military camps to search for the presence of cotinine among young people who are not even legally allowed to smoke.

Cotinine is a chemical produced by the body after being exposed to nicotine and can be detected in urine and saliva. A sewage test kit calibrated specifically for cotinine can help to identify the presence of illicit smoking or vaping. Pair this with a urine test on individuals within those locations, and it will not be difficult to flush out the offenders.

Clearly, the deployment of such test kits has to be thoughtful enough to minimise any contamination of cotinine signals by adult smokers.

Already, people caught for vaping can be subject to home searches to determine whether there is a larger stash of contraband vaping products for personal use or further distribution. This should now be made mandatory.

In addition, people caught for vaping should also be offered the opportunity to mitigate their offence if they reveal their local suppliers and it subsequently leads the police to successfully dismantle distribution networks in Singapore.

The above may sound

intrusive, but do you really want students and adolescents to grow up in an environment that condones their partaking in illegal activities? Or would you prefer to nip the problem in the bud, before they sink into a lifetime of nicotine addiction and associated harm.

The HSA already conducts roaming enforcement checks in public hot spots such as Orchard Road, the Central Business District, and in clubs and bars. Perhaps it is time to augment the enforcement with technology.

The United States already deploys sensors and surveillance cameras in schools and dormitories to identify the illicit use of vaping devices.

Surely, in a country known for its ambition in artificial intelligence, coupled with the proliferation of public surveillance cameras, we could rely on image recognition to identify vapers and to alert nearby enforcement officers to the whereabouts of the offenders. After all, the National Environment Agency already deploys surveillance cameras to tackle the littering problem.

MAKE IT A TEAM EFFORT

There is an urgent need for multiple government ministries and agencies to cooperate to tackle vaping, as this goes beyond the sole remit of the Ministry of Health.

My proposed strategies above require the cooperation and partnership of agencies under different ministries, including Home Affairs, Law, Sustainability and the Environment, Education, and Defence.

The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) can also play a big role in addressing the illicit import and carriage of vaping products.

The ICA and HSA introduced an amnesty scheme at Changi Airport in December where travellers who voluntarily declare and surrender their vaping products are exempted from any penalties. The success of this scheme was aided by large graphical displays that were prominently located in the arrival halls to remind travellers of the prohibition.

Yet, for this scheme to be truly effective, the implementation should be permanent and include all land and sea entry points. Singapore can even follow the United Kingdom in deploying sniffer dogs to detect illegal possession of vaping products at

these locations.

Lastly, we need to mobilise the family and peer support structure to comprehensively weed out vaping.

Similar to smoking, family members, friends, and colleagues often notice the initial signs of a person developing a vaping habit. Offering timely reminders about the criminal nature and harmful addiction of vaping can assist early vapers in avoiding further entrenchment of the habit.

Parents play an especially important role here, both by looking out for the telltale fruity scents at home and by setting the right example for their children to follow. Regrettably, a number of adolescent vapers picked up the habit after seeing their parents vape.

Adult vapers must understand their actions normalise the use of e-cigarettes for children, and research indicates these children are much more likely to engage in vaping or smoking.

Schools have already stepped up surveillance and enforcement against vaping, with strict disciplinary actions, including caning for boys, in place to remind students that it is illegal. Parents need to work in tandem with schools to enrol vaping youth in cessation clinics to help them kick the habit.

Condoning the act for fear of reprisal or punishment cannot be an option that parents take.

NOT JUST SINGAPORE

The proliferation of e-cigarettes and the rise of vaping is not just a Singapore problem. The World Health Organisation recently published irrefutable evidence that an increasing number of children and adolescents worldwide are vaping, regardless of whether their countries permit or criminalise the sale and use of e-cigarettes.

The rise of underage vaping is alarming, especially since e-cigarettes are a gateway to nicotine addiction, which can subsequently lead one to regular cigarette smoking.

We are seeing clear signs that vaping is becoming entrenched in our society. It is time to take bold and decisive actions to tackle this new public health issue.

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