

The tobacco industry is not a 'normal' business

While current measures such as taxation and declaring more smoke-free areas certainly help, stronger endgame measures, such as a tobacco-free generation or reducing nicotine content in cigarettes to near-zero levels, are needed to shift the needle to a smoking prevalence of 5 per cent or less, says the writer. PHOTO: PEXELS

It is time for S'pore to embrace the 'tobacco endgame' and eliminate tobacco use rather than focus on just reducing its use.

Yvette Van Der Eijk

Tobacco products are the only legally available ones on the market that, when used as intended, kill more than eight million people each year, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). That number includes an estimated 1.3 million non-smokers who are exposed to second-hand smoke.

In another grim reminder of the deadly effect of tobacco use, the WHO says it kills up to half of users who don't quit.

The tobacco industry profits from these deaths, as the total value of sales of tobacco products globally amounts to more than a trillion Singapore dollars each year. The industry has worked hard to obfuscate its role and stay in business.

It did so in a myriad of ways, including by lying to the public about the health effects of smoking, producing misleading science to downplay the health risks, facilitating the illicit tobacco trade, deliberately targeting youth in marketing, and bribing and lobbying government officials.

Such practices have come to light only because of whistle-blowers in the industry and internal industry documents publicly released after lawsuits

against tobacco companies. Among other things, the documents outlined how the companies targeted youth in Singapore with flavoured cigarettes, misled the public into believing that "light" cigarettes are safer and attempted to influence government ministries through lobbying efforts.

More recently, a *Straits Times* article revealed how a Chinese vaping manufacturer used its Singapore office to illegally promote its vaping products to youth on social media.

The company gave its "vapefluencers" specific instructions to circumvent platform restrictions, and bribed officials in other countries to get around restrictions and market vaping products laced with nicotine as "nicotine-free".

SHIFT TO A TOBACCO ENDGAME

Some countries have had enough, shifting their focus from reducing tobacco use to more ambitious "tobacco endgame" measures designed to eliminate tobacco use by a certain year.

An example of such a measure is the tobacco-free generation law, which prohibits tobacco sales to anyone born after a certain date. This law has already been passed in six towns in the US state of Massachusetts.

Various other countries, including the UK, Malaysia, New Zealand, France, Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands, have also considered implementing a tobacco-free generation law.

A recent study published in *Lancet Global Health* found that

at least 18 countries, as well as the European Union and Pacific Islands regions, have set official targets to reduce smoking prevalence to less than 5 per cent by a certain year.

The study also found that another 23 countries, including Singapore, could be well positioned for endgame measures.

This is largely due to their advanced tobacco regulations and low smoking prevalence of less than 15 per cent.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR A COUNTRY TO SET A TOBACCO ENDGAME TARGET?

For a tobacco endgame to work, it needs to be backed by strong political and public support.

Another critical component of the paradigm shift from "tobacco control" to "tobacco endgame" is the denormalisation of the industry, as the goal of the endgame is essentially to get rid of the tobacco business.

Tobacco industry denormalisation involves exposing the unethical practices of its companies and stripping away their perceived legitimacy. It is about making it clear that tobacco businesses are predatory entities that sacrifice public health for profit.

Denormalising the tobacco industry is already a key part of some countries' health education campaigns.

Australia's "Quit" campaign, for example, includes messages about the deceitful tactics of tobacco companies, including their manipulation of products with menthol to get youth hooked on

vaping and smoking.

In the US, the "truth" campaign specifically targets youth with bold, honest messages about how they are being targeted by tobacco companies.

These campaigns have successfully helped to change perceptions about smoking and reduce its prevalence in the country.

The message of these campaigns may also resonate with youth as it is less preachy than the "bad for your health" message, and educates them on how they are systematically manipulated by predatory industries.

ROOM TO EDUCATE S'POREANS ON TOBACCO INDUSTRY

Despite the ills of the tobacco industry, it is still perceived as a "normal" part of the business landscape in Singapore.

The three tobacco transnational companies all have their regional headquarters in Singapore. They are Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International.

JUUL, the company which paid out over US\$462 million (S\$625 million) in lawsuit settlements in the US last year for targeting teenagers with its highly addictive vaping products, also has a research and development office in Singapore.

There is also a lack of public awareness of the industry's role in perpetuating the tobacco epidemic.

While Singaporeans generally tend to agree that smoking is bad for your health and should be regulated, they tend to agree less

that the tobacco industry is responsible and should be held accountable for Singapore's tobacco-related diseases burden, a survey in 2019 showed.

Highlighting the industry's role could go a long way in increasing public support for more ambitious tobacco endgame measures, such as a tobacco-free generation.

The measures send a strong message that society is no longer willing to tolerate the tobacco industry or its products.

This year's World No Tobacco Day on May 31 underscores the need to protect youth from the tobacco industry.

Youth are a critical demographic for tobacco companies because almost everyone who picks up smoking for the first time does so at a young age.

Tobacco companies are acutely aware of this and have even referred to youth in their internal documents as "replacement smokers", obviously for those who have quit or died from tobacco-related disease.

By educating young people about how they are being targeted and manipulated, Singapore can foster a generation that is more resistant to smoking and vaping.

HOW TO DENORMALISE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

Denormalising involves a number of facets. It requires a robust public education campaign that exposes the industry's tactics.

Schools can play a crucial role by integrating this content into their health education curricula.

Campaigns that target current smokers, such as i Quit, should educate people on how the tobacco industry deceives its consumers.

For example, they could address the common misperception that cigarettes with lower tar and nicotine content, often marketed as "lights", are safer.

Organisations in Singapore should reject any form of partnership with or sponsorship from tobacco companies, as these help to legitimise the tobacco industry and can give them more influence in lobbying policymakers.

Although Singapore has been successful in reducing smoking prevalence from 13.3 per cent in 2007 to just 9.2 per cent of the population in 2022, tobacco remains a leading cause of chronic disease in Singapore.

The shift from "tobacco control" to a tobacco endgame is essential to reducing the burden from cancers and heart, lung and other diseases in Singapore.

Current measures such as taxation and declaring more smoke-free areas certainly help.

But stronger endgame measures, such as a tobacco-free generation or reducing nicotine content in cigarettes to near-zero levels, are needed to shift the needle to a smoking prevalence of 5 per cent or less.

In Singapore, like elsewhere around the world, the tobacco industry has been getting away with deplorable tactics for decades.

It is time to stop thinking of it as a "normal", legitimate industry, and Singapore should join the growing list of nations rushing towards the endgame for smoking.

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