Source: *The Straits Times,* pB2
Date: 19 August 2025

It's time vaping offences had tougher consequences

At the National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong made a vital and decisive move in declaring vaping a drug issue.

Ben Chester Cheong

Vaping has evolved from a tobacco substitute into a sophisticated drug delivery system, says the writer. This reality demands stronger consequences within Singapore's established legal pathways. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

The scale of Singapore's vaping crisis has become starkly clear in recent months.

Between January 2024 and March 2025, more than 17,900 people were caught for possession, while $41 million in devices seized exceeded five times the value of all confiscations from 2019 to 2023.

In the most recent revelations, one-third of more than 100 randomly tested vapes contained etomidate. Etomidate is a powerful anaesthetic used in hospitals to render patients unconscious for surgery. Inhaled through vape devices, it can trigger sudden collapse, respiratory depression, or even death.

Vaping has evolved from a tobacco substitute into a sophisticated drug delivery system. This reality demands stronger consequences within Singapore's established legal pathways.

As the authorities work towards listing etomidate under the Misuse of Drugs Act, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, in his National Day Rally speech, made a strong commitment to treat vaping as a "drug issue" with stiffer penalties.

This marks a necessary and decisive shift to confront this new and evolving threat.

SINGAPORE'S PROVEN APPROACH

Singapore's current drug rehabilitation system represents global best practice, with recidivism rates declining from 73 per cent in 1993 to 30.8 per cent in 2022.

When someone is caught abusing drugs in Singapore, they do not automatically go to jail. Instead, the Government has four different ways to handle offenders depending on how serious the case is.

For first-time users who seem unlikely to reoffend, the Enhanced Direct Supervision Order lets them stay at home while attending counselling sessions and taking regular drug tests.

More serious cases go to the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC), where offenders live in a treatment facility for at least 12 months, getting help to quit drugs. This approach prioritises rehabilitation while maintaining strong deterrent elements through institutional supervision and community monitoring.

Under both scenarios, there are no criminal records if you are only caught using drugs and not selling them.

For young offenders aged 16 to 21 who commit more serious crimes, reformative training means living in a detention centre for up to three years, followed by supervised release. The harshest option is regular prison sentences for drug abusers or repeat offenders. Both these situations involve a permanent criminal record.

Despite the current comprehensive framework, vaping devices pose unique challenges.

Traditional drug users typically make conscious decisions about substance consumption. Vaping offenders, however, often believe they are using harmless nicotine products as the devices reveal nothing about their contents. This creates a dangerous knowledge gap that existing risk assessments cannot adequately address. This unknown can lead to immediate public safety hazards – from sudden unconsciousness to impaired driving.

Moreover, established drug rehabilitation programmes excel at treating known substances with established treatment protocols. But the constantly changing composition of vape pods – from synthetic cannabinoids to anaesthetics – requires more intensive intervention to ensure comprehensive detoxification and education.

RISK AS DETERRENT

Under Section 18 of the Misuse of Drugs Act, ignorance provides no defence when controlled substances are found in one's possession. This strict liability principle – where the law assumes you are aware of what you carry – should likewise apply to vaping devices that function as drug delivery systems.

When one-third of seized vapes contain dangerous anaesthetics, simply possessing a vape already carries serious risk. Each act of possession should therefore be treated as an assumption of risk, warranting stronger measures than those used for typical drug use cases.

Just as ignorance of a gun's loaded status doesn't excuse its illegal possession, ignorance of a vape's chemical composition cannot excuse the possession of what has become a probable drug delivery device.

Singapore could also strengthen its current approach by requiring all youth vaping offenders – regardless of risk level – to undergo mandatory DRC admission instead of Youth Enhanced Supervision. This can provide a strong deterrent effect by removing the young person from their environment for an extended period.

This approach ensures comprehensive medical assessment for potential etomidate exposure, intensive education about vaping risks, and structured rehabilitation before dependency patterns develop. The deterrent value lies precisely in the significant disruption to normal life that demonstrates the seriousness of vaping violations.

Where capacity constraints prevent the DRC system from handling increased youth referrals, Singapore could establish mandatory short-term residential programmes specifically for youth vaping offenders. This "circuit breaker" approach would involve four to eight weeks of residential intervention rather than the 12-plus months typical of DRC admission.

Such programmes would operate with strict regimental structure similar to DRC protocols, immediately isolating the young people from all external influences through enforced residential confinement. In more serious cases, reformative training may become necessary.

The courts have consistently held that deterrence can take precedence over rehabilitation when offence gravity demands it.

Recent cases illustrate the threat: Mohammed Akil Abdul Rahim became Singapore's first convicted K-pod manufacturer, found with enough etomidate powder to fill 72 pods, while a 16-year-old boy was discovered with 54 vape pods during a home raid.

These cases demonstrate why traditional risk assessment frameworks prove inadequate when criminal organisations deliberately target young people through sophisticated deception. To stay ahead of such threats, we should also turn to technology-enhanced detection.

DETECTION AS DETERRENT

Beyond policy frameworks, Singapore's proven technological capabilities offer unprecedented opportunities to transform vaping enforcement from reactive to predictive.

For instance, Singapore could explore leveraging its extensive CCTV network and proven artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities for real-time vaping detection and intervention. We could deploy predictive surveillance technologies that identify vaping behaviours as they occur, enabling immediate intervention before substances take effect.

Existing police camera networks could potentially be enhanced with AI algorithms trained to recognise distinctive vaping behaviours: the characteristic hand-to-mouth movements, vapour exhalation patterns, and device concealment techniques that distinguish vaping from legitimate activities.

These behavioural signatures are sufficiently distinct that machine learning systems could flag potential violations with high accuracy rates, particularly in monitored public spaces like MRT stations, shopping centres, and school vicinity areas.

Singapore might consider adapting its proven facial recognition capabilities to create real-time alerts when known vaping offenders enter high-risk areas. Integration with existing databases would enable automatic flagging when individuals with previous vaping violations appear in locations where enforcement presence should be heightened.

By predicting and preventing violations in real time, enforcement becomes a deterrent rather than a reaction.

THE STAKES ARE CLEAR

The global experience confirms that permissive approaches to emerging drug threats create long-term public health disasters. Cities that prioritise harm reduction (providing safe consumption sites and clean equipment rather than enforcing prohibition) over comprehensive rehabilitation programmes now struggle with widespread public drug use and overdose epidemics.

Vaping has been banned in Singapore since 2018, with current laws imposing maximum fines of $2,000 for possession, use, or purchase. Clearly, this has proven to be an insufficient deterrent.

The Government's commitment to harsher penalties reflects this reality, but youth offenders require age-appropriate consequences that account for their developmental vulnerabilities.

Sending young people to prison may be counterproductive, potentially exposing them to more serious criminal influences and disrupting their education and family relationships at critical developmental stages.

The key is to reverse the trend that was heading towards normalisation of vaping among youth. That would have made future enforcement and treatment efforts far more difficult.

The stakes are evident when a 13-year-old girl is seen behaving erratically while vaping outside courtrooms, or when a driver crashes with etomidate in the bloodstream.

PM Wong's decision to treat vaping as a drug issue reflects adaptive leadership. It builds on Singapore's rehabilitation successes rather than discarding them, while adapting to meet a new threat.

But tackling this cannot be left to enforcement alone.

Families and communities also bear the burden of youth vaping, and enhanced rehabilitation measures can create clear pathways for intervention. This reinforces family structures, social expectations, and structured support through Singapore's proven institutions.

• Ben Chester Cheong is a legal academic affiliated with the Singapore University of Social Sciences, University of Reading, Cambridge C-EENRG and NUS Apcel. He is also a lawyer at RHTLaw Asia.

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.