



Auckland Women's Health Council

**Oral Submission of the Auckland Women's Health Council on the
Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Bill (No 2)
to the Health Select Committee
Thursday, 10 October 2024**

(transcript)

Tēnā koutou katoa, kia ora tatou.

I'm Sue Claridge representing the Auckland Women's Health Council; thank you for the opportunity to make an oral submission today on the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Bill.

We are a voluntary organisation of individual women and women's groups who have an interest in and commitment to women's health issues. The organisation was formed in 1988 to provide a voice on women's health issues.

Our greatest concern with the current legislation around vape products, including the proposed amendments to the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act, is the perpetuation of the idea that vaping is a legitimate safe adult recreational habit.

It is not.

It is no more a legitimate safe adult recreational habit than smoking tobacco products. Vaping may be less harmful than smoking tobacco products, and a legitimate tool for quitting smoking, but it is not safe for anyone, not just our tamariki and rangatahi.

We most strenuously object to any legislation that continues to permit the retail sales of vapes and vape products as if vaping is a legitimate safe adult recreational habit.

Vaping is harmful!

While we agree that vaping is less harmful than tobacco smoking, it is still harmful to the health of people who vape.

There has been the creation of a new cohort of people addicted to nicotine through recreational vaping. Nicotine is highly addictive, and it adversely affects cardiovascular measures and brain development and functioning. Among non-smokers vape use results in dependence on nicotine.

In addition, vaping has been proven to be a gateway to smoking. I am the mother of a young man, who in his teens started vaping as did many of his friends and peers at high school. Despite growing up in a

non-smoking household, one in which the harms of tobacco smoking were discussed, and despite his apparent distaste for smokers and tobacco smoking, for a short time he smoked cigarettes as a direct consequence of vaping. Fortunately, he no longer vapes or smokes, for which I am eternally grateful.

However, I know from my own observations and from the conversations I have had with my young adult children, that my son's experience and pathway to smoking is common. I do not believe that he would ever have taken up smoking without having vaped first, and developed a liking for the effects of nicotine.

Young adults, including those over 18, take up vaping because they think not just that it is less harmful than smoking, but that it is actually safe. It is not! And there is increasing volumes of peer reviewed medical research that demonstrates that it is not safe.

The development of modern vapes or e-cigarettes was originally for the purpose of reducing the harm of tobacco smoking. Pharmacist and inventor, Hon Lik, was the first to register a patent for the modern e-cigarette device. Lik cited the death of his father, who was a heavy smoker, as the main motivation for him to find an alternative to smoking cigarettes.

E-cigarettes were introduced to the market in Aoteroa New Zealand in 2006 and were widely promoted as a smoking cessation tool. However, since their introduction, vaping has become increasingly prevalent among New Zealanders including those who have never smoked.

Vaping is increasingly seen as a "cool" thing to do recreationally, not as a health tool to reduce harm from smoked tobacco and to aid quitting. There has been a significant rise in the availability of vape products and number of retail outlets selling to people who have never smoked.

Allowing this is akin to suggesting that methadone, which is specifically used to assist people who are dependent on opioids, should be made available to people who do not have an opioid addiction. I recognise that the seriousness of opioid addiction and the use of methadone to treat addicts is on another scale altogether. However, there are important parallels; specifically, that e-cigarettes or vapes were a health tool specifically aimed at help tobacco smokers deal with their addiction and quit smoking.

Yet now, we have legislation that accepts the harmful practice of vaping as a legitimate and okay thing to do, such that we have specialist vapes stores where vape products can be sold to anyone over the age of 18. While we are at it, why don't we let them sell other addictive and harmful substances, like methadone, on the basis they it less harmful than a class C drug like heroin. Or perhaps we could retail pharmaceutical amphetamines because they are less harmful than meth.

Yes, I understand that what I am saying is ridiculous, and over-the-top. But so is retailing vape products to just anyone over 18 – products that were designed and originally introduced as a health measure to stop people smoking cigarettes.

Tobacco harm reduction is a key public health strategy, but we seem to have entirely lost sight of what we were trying to achieve with vape products and are now saying, go for it everyone, vape your heart out and don't worry about the harm... after all it's not as bad as smoking tobacco.

We might as well say, fine, drive 120 km on the road with your seat belt on, because, it's safer than driving without a seatbelt.

Vaping must not be seen as a legitimate and "safe" recreational habit. It's not!

Vape products must only be available to tobacco smokers wanting to quit smoking.

Therefore, vape products must only be available in the way that methadone is, through strictly managed outlets like pharmacies, and only available to actual tobacco smokers trying to quit.

I'm hesitant to suggest that they should be prescription only, because that adds unwanted extra pressure to our already burnt out, overworked primary health sector. However, making vape products available through pharmacies or specialist smoking reduction clinics or outlets, takes vape products away from a profit driven sector and puts them where they should be, in the health sector as a specific and authentic harm reduction strategy.

The only beneficiaries of continued sales of vape products are the manufacturers, distributors and wholesalers, and retailers of such products, particularly the tobacco industry. Continuing to allow retail sales of vape products is blatant pandering to the tobacco industry whose sole purpose is the manufacture and sale of harmful tobacco products for profit, and who have turned to manufacturing and selling vape products to make up for lost revenue from declining sales of smoked tobacco products.

We are asking you to make far more significant amendments to the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act. If the Government is genuine about its commitment to reducing smoking rates, and if the Government genuinely cares about the health of New Zealanders, it needs to go back to the original intent of e-cigarettes and vapes as smoking cessation tools, and ensure that vape products are only available for tobacco smokers trying to quit.