

An alternate approach needed to phase out cigarettes in Malaysia

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The Health Ministry recently proposed an outright ban for tobacco and other smoking products, but a more risk-proportionate approach is worth considering. (File pic credit: Pexels)

ON January 27, 2022, the Health Ministry announced plans to ban tobacco and other smoking products for those born after 2005.

Further clarification revealed that the proposed ban would also cover vape and vaping products.

In a recent survey by the Retail and Trade Brand Advocacy Malaysia Chapter (RTBA Malaysia), the vast majority of respondents felt that the ban would not work, and would instead create a black market for illicit cigarettes and vape.

According to RTBA Malaysia managing director Datuk Fazli Nordin, while he understood the Health Ministry's motivation, an outright ban is not the solution.

The Malaysian government's proposal is similar to New Zealand's plan to phase out smoking starting 2027. However, Fazli pointed out a stark difference in New Zealand's approach — it did not impose a ban on vape products.

"Instead, the country promotes vape as a less harmful alternative and encourages New Zealanders to make the switch from traditional cigarettes," he said.

A RISK-PROPORTIONATE APPROACH

Many studies show that vaping is much less harmful than smoking. A study from the University of Queensland found e-cigarettes to be 50 per cent more effective than nicotine replacement therapies to assist smokers in quitting.

Therefore, the idea is to develop regulations in tandem with the risk-level of the product.

According to tobacco control expert, Clive Bates, it could look something like this — while traditional cigarette packs show bold graphic warnings, vaping products could have more subtle messages about the value of switching.

Besides that, vape should be allowed to be advertised as a less harmful alternative to smoking, instead of having a total advertising ban. Similarly, the product ought to be accessible to consumers.

Instead of a blanket ban on tobacco and other smoking products, having less strict regulations on less harmful products like vape could incentivise smokers to switch from high-risk to low-risk products.

"The trouble is that many people don't want to quit [smoking] or don't want it enough to go through the struggle. Because switching to vaping involves giving up less, it is much easier to do, therefore, many more people will be able to feel the health benefits," said Bates.

Besides that, Fazli reminds the public that regulations must be in tandem with market demand, otherwise, people will go to the black market.

"For example, vape products containing nicotine are currently prohibited from being sold in the market. Yet, there is consumer demand for vape products containing nicotine," he said.

When demand is there, but consumers cannot find what they want legally, that's when the black market will boom, which is why the government must take a pragmatic approach.