

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 13
RUANGAN : NATION

THE STAR, SATURDAY 1 JULY 2023

Nation 13

Stop pushing vape to our kids

Due to legal loopholes, children as young as eight are beginning to vape. The fear is they may move on to worse things later. Giving up smoking by vaping may be acceptable, but graduating from vaping to others is certainly not.

THE girl was just 15, and she was defiant. She had been caught hiding a vape pen in her bra. She felt it was her right to smoke it, as it had no smell and was just "fruit juice".

Asked why she had it hidden, she said: "The teachers check my pockets, bags and everywhere else but not under my bra. I smoke it, so what?"

Her friend, aged 14, had been caught, too. She had the vape pen hidden in the hem of her pants.

Vaping, which started out as a "safe method" to quit smoking, is no longer just a way to wean yourself off the cancer stick. It has become a whole new addiction unto itself and may soon replace smoking as a major national problem.

Thousands of children around the country have taken to vaping, say experts. And it doesn't help that the government has now pretty much legalised it, giving youngsters access to buying – and puffing on – the fragrant chemicals.

There are said to be some 16,000 flavours available, making them so tempting to children.

And it's not just 15-year-olds. In a growing township in Penang, eight- to 10-year-olds have been caught vaping. They know almost all the shops that sell vape products around the booming, touristy township.

The children, who were questioned by the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), claimed they picked up the habit from their parents or older siblings, who allowed them to have a puff or two.

The parents had thought it was a harmless habit, too. Far from it.

Vaping can cause asthma, lung problems and even organ damage. There's a whole new disease that's related to it; it's called EVALI, short for e-cigarette or vaping-use associated lung injury.

And it's not something to be scoffed at. Earlier this month, a 16-year-old girl in Kuala Lumpur, who had apparently been vaping

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Why not?

for three years, died of acute heart failure due to EVALI.

A two-year-old from Shah Alam came down with neurological problems while visiting relatives in Temerloh. She had ingested, or somehow smoked, vape liquid.

Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa has acknowledged the problem, saying it costs some RM150,000 to treat an EVALI patient for 12 days. And we have already had 18 such cases since 2022. Do the math – that's RM2.7mil that could have been put to better use.

There are many more such cases. The United States and the United Kingdom have both reported thousands of such cases over the last couple of years.

The bigger problem is that the Malaysian government has allowed the sale of gel nicotine, an active ingredient in vaping liquid. It was removed from a list of banned items under the Poisons Act.

It is therefore now legal to sell it, as long as you pay taxes. With the exemption, there is little to stop children from buying them.

In Penang, CAP research officer N.V. Subbarow says some 2,000 primary school children have admitted to having used vape.

Some were ordering vape sticks and liquids online using supplementary credit cards given to them by their parents.

"The busy parents give them the cards to buy food and stationery, but they buy vape products. Other kids pool their money to buy the sticks," Subbarow says.

They do not have to look far to



Hard to quit: Youths in school uniform vaping freely is an increasingly common sight nowadays.

buy the gadget or vape liquid. There are older children in schools who are selling the stuff. These "pushers" get discounts and freebies from unscrupulous vape shop owners.

Even some of the ubiquitous *ottu kadai* – tiny lean-to sheds that double up as newsstands and candy stores – stock vape gadgets and liquids.

The danger is real for school-kids. A 2016 survey showed that 14.2% of adolescents aged between 10 and 19 were smokers, while 9.1% used these then-illegal vape products.

Bandar Kuching MP Dr Kelvin Yip, who is also the Health Minister's special advisor, has said he disagrees with his boss' decision to remove liquid and gel nicotine from the Poisons List.

"There is a gap in the law after gel nicotine was removed from the Poisons Act," he says, adding that the onus is now on parents not to expose their children to vaping.

But parents are not always very bright. The government has to educate parents and adolescents about the dangers of e-cigarettes, says Dr Yip.

The problem is that the govern-

ment is not terribly bright either. Just months ago, we were looking at banning cigarettes and smoking completely, especially for those born in 2007 and thereafter.

Now, it has suddenly become legal to vape. And the Bill to ban smoking has been sent back to the drawing board. Even if passed, it will only stop children from possessing cigarettes and vape gadgets, but they can easily buy them online and from the "pushers" at school.

I am no killjoy, and I have always believed that smokers have as much right to their puff as non-smokers do to a smoke-free environment. But I have also seen a couple of smoker friends die of lung cancer. It wasn't pretty.

The statistics, too, do not favour smokers. Generally, countries that frown upon smoking have a longer life expectancy, while those with many smokers see many die young.

More than 50% of the population of Nauru, a tiny island country near Papua New Guinea, are smokers. The life expectancy there? Sixty-four years. In countries like Switzerland, Japan and Sweden, people can expect to live into their 80s. In Malaysia, it's 76.

It's a bit simplistic to say a ban on smoking increases life expectancy; other factors like access to healthcare and education help. But smoking is definitely costly to the economy.

Former Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin has said that the government spent RM6.2bil to treat smoke-related diseases in 2020, more than double the RM3bil revenue derived from tobacco sales.

So, taxation alone is not a good enough reason to allow smoking – or vaping, for that matter.

However, there are those who argue that adults who can choose a government should be able to choose their lifestyle, including whether to smoke or vape. I can live with that.

But the fact is, even if we believe adults should be allowed to decide for themselves, it is important that we prevent the young ones from picking up vaping – and then progressing to smoking, or worse.

Vaping meant to wean smokers off cigarettes is one thing; vaping as a training ground for those who want to graduate to smoking, or even drugs, is another. A society like that should not be allowed to take shape.