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Editorial | Our View

E-cigarette rules a step forward for public health

The known facts on the health effects of electronic cigarettes — “e-cigs” — are relatively few.

In that context, the release of new regulations governing their manufacture and sale makes sense, as long as the process can be streamlined a bit to eliminate extraneous bureaucratic procedures.

Oversight is especially needed concerning the production of the liquid that the battery-powered e-cig devices turn to gas for “vaping.” It’s impossible to gauge the health effects of vaping — and how they compare with the known threats of tobacco smoking — if authorities don’t know what’s being inhaled.

The federal Food and Drug Administration last week announced the new regulations requiring, among other things, that manufacturers submit their products for a safety review.

The review must disclose the precise ingredients comprising the liquid. Under the rules, which are due to go into effect after a 90-day review, regulators also would check the device design for each flavor.

It’s the lack of definitive data that has been driving the exercise of caution across the nation. Owing partly to Hawaii’s location in easy reach of manufacturers in China, for example, e-cig usage has been high in the islands, with adolescents being a target group.

The flavors are meant to lure the younger users. Although advocates say the vapor at least lacks the cancer-causing elements of regular cigarette smoke, it's wrong to push a product with so many unknowns on the youth.

That's why this and many other states already have been moving toward regulation, banning the sale of e-cigs to minors.

Hawaii lawmakers last year also applied the same regulations that govern cigarettes to e-cigs, barring their use in places where conventional smoking also is banned.

But the federal regulations are needed as well. Federal officials maintain that the regulations will enable states to impose stiffer penalties and will provide them with more federal resources to enforce the law.

The proposed regulations would:

- >> Prohibit retailers from placing them in vending machines or distributing free samples.

- >> Minors would be restricted from buying e-cigs as well as other products, such as hookah, pipe tobacco and nicotine gels.

These regulations, five years in the making, are long overdue. Advocates for the products say the vapor contains the addictive substance nicotine but at least lacks the cancer-causing substances in cigarette smoke; e-cigs thus can be effective smoking-cessation aids, they contend.

The final verdict, however, requires further data and analysis.

Nationally, the cohort of e-cig users comprises more than 15 percent of high school students, and it's unknown how many of them started as nonsmokers and will proceed to regular cigarettes.

Locally, the prospects seem ominous. A two-year University of Hawaii Cancer Center study found after following 2,300 Hawaii teenagers that those using e-cigarettes likely will graduate to tobacco.

Four years ago, use stood at 1 to 2 percent, and now it's up to 20 to 30 percent, according to the study, which focused largely on ninth- and 10th-graders.

A note of caution is warranted: The regulations should be thorough but not duplicative. Manufacturers held accountable for multiple flavors of the same basic active ingredients should be given a streamlined application and review process to avoid pointless repetition of the steps.

Republicans in Congress are already resisting the legislation, especially retroactive reviews of e-cigs already on the market. This is illogical: Anything available for sale

should be held to the same health and safety standards.

Whatever growing pains this new industry must endure to adapt are less than the potential pain of consumers exposed to chemicals that, so far, have been poorly vetted.