

EDITORIAL | OUR VIEW

Tax could help curb e-cigarette use by minors

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BRYAN THOMAS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now ranks e-cigs as the most commonly used nicotine-delivery product among U.S. youth, with minors more likely than adults to use the devices. The key to youth lure: candy-like flavors in vaping liquid. There's no fire, no ash and no smoky smell.

Instead, the battery-powered device heats liquid nicotine into an aerosol mist, or vapor, that's inhaled. While vaping is not smoking, technically, and may not involve tobacco leaves, health officials are rightly worried that the habit is leading youth down a nicotine-addiction path to tobacco.

The leading cause of preventable disease and death in the United States, nearly all tobacco use begins during youth and young adulthood, according to the CDC.

Last year, Hawaii became the first state to raise the smoking age to 21. While the age limit also applies to e-cigarette use, teens addressing state lawmakers last week conveyed why more needs to be done to discourage vaping.

On Maui, where the state DOH estimates that 1 in 3 high school students use e-cigarettes, Baldwin High sophomore Isabelle Collier said she sees even elementary school children vaping. "Parents or family members are allowing kids to use their vapes," Collier said. Such observation indicates that users of all ages wrongly assume e-cigarettes are harmless.

A study released last year by University of Hawaii Cancer Center researchers found that teens who use e-cigarettes are more likely to start smoking tobacco cigarettes about one year after picking up a vaping habit. The finding was based on school surveys of more than 2,300 high school students in Hawaii, mostly ninth- and tenth-graders.

Sen. Roz Baker, (D, South-West Maui), chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Health, maintains that e-cigs should be taxed at the same rate as tobacco products. In Hawaii, the average pack of cigarettes costs about \$9 — as it's subject to a state excise tax of \$3.20 per pack of 20, and a sales tax of about 35 cents.

Lawmakers are looking at increasing the permit and license fees for retailers that sell e-cigarettes. Currently, all that's required of some 100 vendors in the islands is a general excise license. Also, in the works is an exploration of banning internet sales to Hawaii.

The tax requires retailers to pay 40 percent on inventories when purchasing from wholesalers. So, an individual with a \$100,000 inventory would have to come up with an extra \$40,000 to stay in business. The result: more than 100 of that state's estimated 400 vape shops have closed.

E-cigarette advocates contend that such a tactic is a disservice to adults who use vaping to help them stop smoking. However, the Food and Drug Administration has not approved e-cigs for smoking cessation, so, technically, they do not fit in that category.

Both tobacco-filled cigarettes and e-cigs serve as a nicotine delivery system. For the sake of our keiki and general public health, Hawaii should not allow e-cigarettes to continue to fly below the state's tax radar.

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