

28 March 2024

Committee Chair
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament of Victoria

Submitted via Parliament of Victoria website

Dear Committee Chair

Re: Inquiry into vaping and tobacco controls

headspace appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into vaping and tobacco controls in Victoria. In preparing our response, we have invited contributions from the headspace National Youth National Reference Group (hYNRG) and family representatives.

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace has 159 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through our website and through eheadspace. We provide support to young people across four domains: mental health, physical health, work and study, and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services.

headspace services provide support to young people who are vaping, including psychoeducation and support to stop using e-cigarettes. headspace services are advised to access the clinical guidance and resources produced by Queensland's youth AOD agency, Dovetail, to support young people who are vaping.

Young people's use of e-cigarettes

headspace is concerned about the increasing prevalence of e-cigarette use among young people, including those experiencing psychological distress or mental ill health.

National data and anecdotal evidence indicate that a significant proportion of young people have tried vaping – and that the rate is increasing. Recent research by The Behaviour Change Collaborative and VicHealth found that one in five teenagers were vaping at the time of the study.¹ Orygen Youth Mental Health's analysis of data from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey indicates the proportion of young people aged 18 to 25 who had ever used e-cigarettes increased from 9 per cent in 2013 to 26 per cent in 2019.²

Both nicotine and non-nicotine vapes have a range of risks for, and impacts on, young people, including the cost of vaping and disrupting engagement at school or work.³ Despite this, use among teenagers is increasingly becoming normalised – particularly as many young people and children can find e-cigarettes appealing.

¹ The Behaviour Change Collaborative and VicHealth (2024) Influencing gen vape: Unveiling insights into segments of teen vaping categorises young people into distinct segments, decoding their motivations, attitudes and behaviours towards vaping. Retrieved from: [New research offers key insights into teen vaping | The Behaviour Change Collaborative \(thebcc.org.au\)](#).

² Orygen. (2023). *TGA public consultation on NVP reforms: Briefing document*, January 2023.

³ For a summary, see: Health Direct (2024) *Vaping*, retrieved from: [Vaping — health risks and laws | healthdirect](#).

In the age of social media, it is unfortunately not uncommon for young people to be exposed to the e-cigarette habits of influencers and their peers. Young people become desensitised to the actual effects of vaping and tobacco use, instead only seeing the "perfect" few seconds of someone looking "cool" before the next post appears.

hYNRG member

Many factors can drive experimentation with and use of e-cigarettes – including coping with stress, managing anxiety and helping to relax.⁴ Some people may also use vaping to help them quit smoking, as e-cigarettes can help address nicotine addiction. Members of headspace's youth reference group highlighted other reasons:

The presence of peer pressure and the influence of social media in a young person's life is another substantial concern for young people related to tobacco use and vaping. When their friends whom they trust and respect are doing this "cool" thing, like vaping, it can be increasingly difficult to stand their ground and say no.

hYNRG member

Many vapes sold in Australia are incorrectly labelled, and contain nicotine but don't list it as an ingredient. Therefore young people can believe that they are using nicotine-free vapes when they are not.

As someone who has previously engaged with vaping and tobacco use, I believe that the primary issue concerning vaping and tobacco use lies in the misinformation and misconceptions that often arise surrounding their use. Vaping is often considered to be a "safer" alternative to smoking and is often marketed as being relatively harmless. This perception stems from vape company marketing, misinformed word of mouth, and the fact that smoking cessation programs promote the use of e-cigarettes as a valid and clinically-backed method of cessation.

hYNRG member

Responding to young people's use of e-cigarettes

Governments must adopt strong, evidence-based approaches to protect young people from the known harms associated with vaping and use of e-cigarettes (including both nicotine and non-nicotine vapes).

Any regulatory changes should incorporate appropriate lead time, as sudden restrictions of access can lead to challenges for young people, including symptoms of nicotine withdrawal such as irritability, anxiety, and insomnia. Public awareness of regulatory changes, and providing clinical guidance on preventing and ceasing use is critical; a sudden loss of access to e-cigarettes without appropriate support could trigger the uptake of traditional tobacco cigarettes or other substances as an alternative, especially amongst young people experiencing mental health and wellbeing challenges.

⁴ The Behaviour Change Collaborative and VicHealth (2024) Influencing gen vap: Unveiling insights into segments of teen vaping categorises young people into distinct segments, decoding their motivations, attitudes and behaviours towards vaping. Retrieved from: [New research offers key insights into teen vaping | The Behaviour Change Collaborative \(thebcc.org.au\)](https://thebcc.org.au).

Supporting young people to reduce or stop their use of vapes

Support for young people who may be trying or using e-cigarettes is also important. Members of hYNRG and the Family Reference Group suggested that this includes: stronger public health messages; more awareness of where to access support; improved family education; and a greater role for schools in helping young people respond to stress and peer pressure. Recent research by The Behaviour Change Collaborative highlights the need for specific responses across different cohorts of young people, including those who are 'susceptible' to or at risk of vaping in the future.

For some young people, providing information about the potential harms of vaping can be enough to discourage use. However, a different response may be needed for others, including those who are using regularly, as highlighted by a member of the headspace Family Reference Group:

The young person I support has noticed their addiction and whilst they are concerned about the availability of vapes, this is no longer the importance for them. Previous attempts through school counsellors and various quit campaigns, all identify that vaping is bad and you shouldn't do it and provide all the information as to why. In my experience they are finding this "useless" as they know it's bad, they know they shouldn't be doing it, now for them it is an addiction and that information is coming too late ... The words used by my young person, "what is the point in seeking help when they just tell me it's bad don't do it and hand me a piece of paper that says 'why'? I know the reasons and this is why I want to quit, it's hard to do that part."

Family Reference Group member

The links between poor mental health and vaping also reinforce the importance of providing holistic care that integrates responding to poor mental health and substance use (including vaping). Young people can take up vaping to manage symptoms of poor mental health – but regular use of e-cigarettes can in turn impact on the user's mental health.

The relationship between mental ill-health and e-cigarette use is obvious and a key issue related to vaping and tobacco use for young people. Whether a young person experiments with e-cigarettes to escape their psychological distress or the symptoms of mental ill-health develop through sustained use of e-cigarettes, the increasing co-morbidity is alarming. The mental toll of e-cigarette use is significant with effects like addiction, anxiety and depression posing an almost insurmountable challenge for young people to stop using, especially without the right support.

When supporting young people who vape or use tobacco, their mental health and their e-cigarette use are not issues to be dealt with separately because both are inextricable and go hand-in-hand with each other.

hYNRG member

Much of the research on nicotine cessation programs and interventions relates to adults and there is limited understanding of the best interventions for vaping cessation among young people.⁵ More research in this area will help identify the most effective interventions to address vaping among young people.

⁵ Berg, C.J., Krishnan, N., Graham, A.L. & Abrams, L.C. (2021). A synthesis of the literature to inform vaping cessation interventions for young adults, Addictive Behaviors, August 2021.

Research by headspace and Orygen Youth Mental Health found almost a quarter of young people accessing primary mental health services smoke tobacco daily.⁶ This suggests youth mental health settings – including headspace centres – provide an opportunity for prevention and early intervention relating to vaping, smoking and tobacco use. Enabling mental health workers to help young people address underlying reasons for using e-cigarettes – such as managing stress or avoiding psychological distress – is important.

Interventions are needed now

With clear evidence of the harms of vaping – and increasing trial and use of e-cigarettes among young people – it is critical that governments intervene now to support young people who vape.

I am afraid that my generation will endure the same health consequences as those who were young people when tobacco cigarettes were ‘cool’ and not considered harmful.

My parent’s tobacco use is an anxiety that I continue to carry with me as a young adult. After witnessing the physical, mental and social deterioration of an individual who smokes, I can’t comprehend why a young person would want to subject themselves and their loved ones to the devastation of e-cigarettes.

hYNRG member

headspace would welcome the opportunity to discuss young people’s substance use and the opportunities to better support young people using e-cigarettes in more detail if it would assist the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Jason Trethowan

Chief Executive Officer

⁶ Cotton, S.M., Sharmin, S., Gao, C.X., Brown, E., et al. (2022). Prevalence and correlates of tobacco use in young people presenting to Australian primary mental health services, *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*, 25(4): 682-691.