



BREAKING AWAY

FROM THE PACK

A social experiment to explore whether vaping could help SA smokers quit or cut down.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tobacco Products & Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill of 2022 makes no distinction in its treatment of vaping and smoking despite their vastly different risk profiles and ignores the wealth of evidence supporting vaping as an effective pathway out of smoking.

Vaping Saved My Life (VSML), a consumer advocacy group, conducted a 12-week trial with 36 smokers, who were initially supplied with vaping devices and refills, as well as mentorship and support, in their quests to reduce their smoking or give up entirely.

The participants reported that they had smoked for an average of 23 years and only 17% had never tried to quit before. The vast majority (94%) cited health concerns as their reason for wanting to quit and 58% cited the cost of smoking.

Ten out of the original 36 participants withdrew from the challenge, either because they were concerned about the cost of vaping compared to cigarettes, or because they found vaping unsatisfactory.

Over the course of the 12 weeks, participants experimented with different devices, flavours and nicotine strengths to find the optimal combination for their needs.

By the end of the period, 58% of participants had quit the tobacco habit entirely, while 79% of those who had not managed to give up reported a reduction in their consumption of cigarettes.

When they were asked to complete a close-out report several weeks after the conclusion of the challenge, 41% of respondents had not relapsed. Among those who had relapsed, 46% said that although they still smoked a little, it was a small fraction of their prior consumption and they felt optimistic about their ability to successfully quit in the future using vaping products.

All of the close-out survey participants stated that they would recommend switching to vaping to friends or family members who smoke as a means of reducing their risks from smoking or helping them quit smoking entirely. For the future, 68% of those who completed the close-out survey indicated they would carry on vaping, 18% would be smoking and vaping and 14% would just be smoking.

Those participants who were able to switch entirely to vaping by the end of the trial reported perceived improvements in their health. They also reported relief from adverse symptoms of smoking such as headaches, nausea and dizziness. The experiment illustrates that vaping may serve an important role in supporting smokers in quitting smoking, avoiding relapse or reducing their smoking. While no medical evaluations took place either before or after the challenge, participants reported feeling significant enhancements in their health, demonstrating that vaping should be further explored as a potentially feasible method for harm reduction in South Africa.

PREFACE

A word from VSML co-founder Kurt Yeo:

"Smoking cessation is the goal of at least 66% of the 11.1 million¹ South Africans over the age of 15 who smoke. Unfortunately, due to a lack of public smoking cessation services and products, many are destined to fail, with only 3% to 5% ever achieving complete abstinence by relying on the 'cold turkey' approach. Countries around the world have struggled for decades in tackling this extremely dangerous and stubborn habit with varying degrees of success, but none have reached the elusive smoke-free status of 5%.

"The answer will not be found in restrictions, excise taxes and approved cessation methods but a concept that proved instrumental in the fight against other non-communicable threats to public health: harm reduction. Vaping and other less harmful nicotine products do just that, by offering the same desired effect and eliminating the harm as much as possible. Harm reduction does not only rely purely on a product or behavioural substitutes but requires accurate and truthful information, empowering the user to make informed decisions.

"The now-proven strategy of harm reduction acknowledges that, for some, the leap to complete abstinence is too great and the next best approach is to reduce the consequences of their choices."



INTRODUCTION

The Tobacco Products & Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill² is currently before Parliament. While the Bill states its aim as being to “**reduce the prevalence of tobacco use and nicotine dependence**”, it goes on to apply the same restrictions to both smoking and vaping, despite the vastly different risk profiles of the two³. Based on available science, vaping has been estimated to be at least **95% less harmful than smoking cigarettes**^{3,4}.

DID YOU KNOW...

Approximately only 5% of people who try to quit tobacco succeed without using a product to help them⁵?

Source: Mayo Clinic. *Quit-smoking products: Boost your chance of success.* (2022, April 8). Link: [mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/quit-smoking/in-depth/quit-smoking-products/art-20045599](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/quit-smoking/in-depth/quit-smoking-products/art-20045599)

Moreover, the proposed Bill ignores copious amounts of other scientific evidence of vaping’s efficacy in helping smokers quit^{6,7,8,9,10} and how this has been adopted as a tobacco harm reduction strategy in countries around the world to improve the health of their citizens and reduce smoking rates. In the United Kingdom, for instance, which is aiming to be smoke-free by 2030, the government is supplying one million smokers¹¹ with vapes to help them quit.

To help South African policymakers and the public at large understand the emotional and difficult journey that smokers face when trying to quit, consumer advocacy group Vaping Saved My Life (VSML) gave 40 South African smokers the opportunity to take part in a 12-week,

nationwide challenge, dubbed ***Mzansi Make the Switch***. Over the challenge period, participants were introduced to vaping as a tool to help them give up or reduce the number of cigarettes they consume, in addition to being mentored, supported and guided through their quitting journeys.

DID YOU KNOW...

South Africa is home to 11 million tobacco smokers, with 41% attempting to quit in the past 12 months¹²?

Source: SA Department of Health. 2022. *Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) 2021.* Link: health.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Global-Adult-Tobacco-Survey-GATS-SA_FS-Populated__28-April-2022.pdf

In 2022, VSML undertook a similar smaller-scale social experiment which saw **71% of entrants “staying stopped”**¹². This inspired the organisation to repeat the challenge while expanding it to more people, especially because misunderstandings continue about the potential role of vaping in helping smokers switch to less harmful products^{3,4}.

With both social experiments, VSML wanted to gather its own data, information and testimonials, rather than rely solely on what has been found in previous studies or the media, which appear to have somewhat neglected the emotional and behavioural aspects of giving up. However, this social experiment is not a scientific study, but rather an experiment to contribute to the public debate around vaping and its role in society.

APPROACH

- » VSML put out a public call for smokers looking to give up or reduce the harm caused by their habit to apply to take part in the challenge.
- » Applicants were required to write a motivation outlining their reasons for quitting.
- » Those who were under the age of 25, pregnant, breastfeeding, current participants of quit programmes or users of nicotine replacement therapies were not allowed to participate in the experiment.
- » In total, 180 applications were received – far more than had been expected and more than could be accommodated – and 36 people were ultimately selected to take part in the challenge which began in March 2023 and culminated in July 2023. All were asked to self-assess their journeys via surveys every two weeks.
- » At the outset, each participant was supplied with a vaping device and two e-liquids free of charge. Later on, those who requested different flavours were gifted one each on a once-off basis. They were also matched with a mentor. These were members of the vaping industry who themselves had gone through the journey of quitting smoking. Their role was to help the smokers develop personalised switching plans with the ultimate goal of being completely smoke-free by the end of the challenge.
- » With studies^{13,14} proving that using the help of a group can increase quitting success (one study puts the effect size at between 50% and 130%¹³), a dedicated WhatsApp group was also set up to provide additional support from the other participants and mentors.

FINDINGS

PRE-CHALLENGE

At the start of the challenge, the participants were asked to complete an intake survey so that the organisers could learn about them and their needs.

On average, the 36 participants reported that they had smoked for 23 years, with one reporting a 45-year habit. Fifty-eight percent spent between R101 and R500 per week on cigarettes and 69% smoked fewer than 20 cigarettes per day.

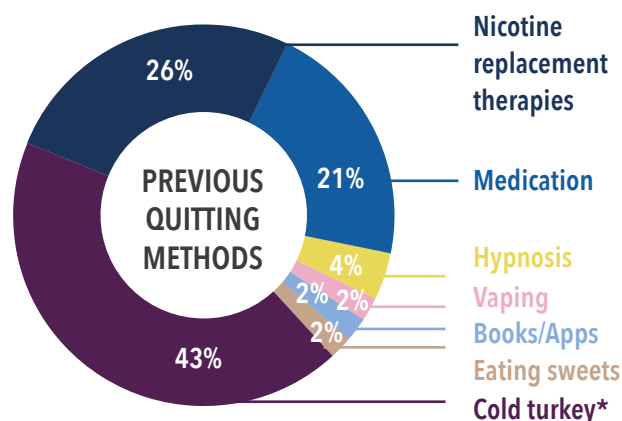
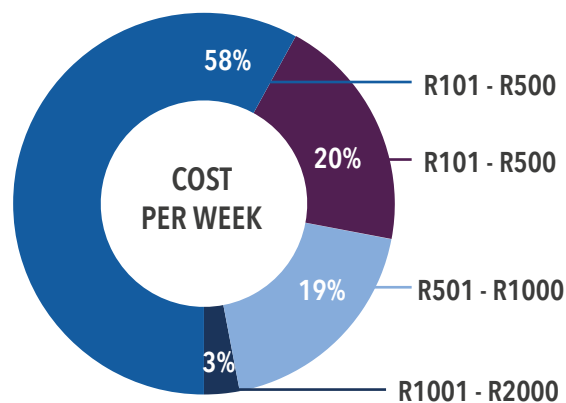
Only 17% of participants had never attempted quitting smoking before. Among those who had tried to stop previously, the most common methods were going 'cold turkey'* (43%), nicotine replacement therapies (26%) and medication (21%). Only 2% had tried vaping. As to why their previous quit attempts hadn't been successful, they cited the primary cause as being cravings (45%), followed by stress (37%) and social pressure (7%).

Regarding their reasons for wanting to quit this time around, 94% cited health concerns and 58% said the cost.

DID YOU KNOW...

The main reason why most vapers (41%) started using e-cigarettes was to quit or cut down on traditional tobacco?

Source: Vaping Saved My Life 2022 Vapers Survey



*Quitting without immediately supplementing the missing item with something else / the abrupt and complete cessation of taking something

"The cost is affecting us as a family. My mood is not well if I don't smoke and will cause unnecessary strain on my relationships. Hopefully stopping smoking will change this."

- A participant who was a smoker for 20 years and has now quit by using vaping.

CHALLENGE PERIOD

Of the initial 36 participants selected, ten participants withdrew, with some finding vaping unsatisfactory and others being concerned that vaping would be too costly to continue with, compared to cigarettes. The introduction of a vaping excise tax in South Africa during this time period appeared to influence some participants' decisions.

In the first week, 20% of the remaining 26 participants had managed to make the switch from smoking to vaping and from the very start, felt they were experiencing notable improvements in their health. Twenty-three percent observed that their senses of smell and taste had improved, 21% reported that they could breathe easier, and 16% said that they had felt their energy levels were better.

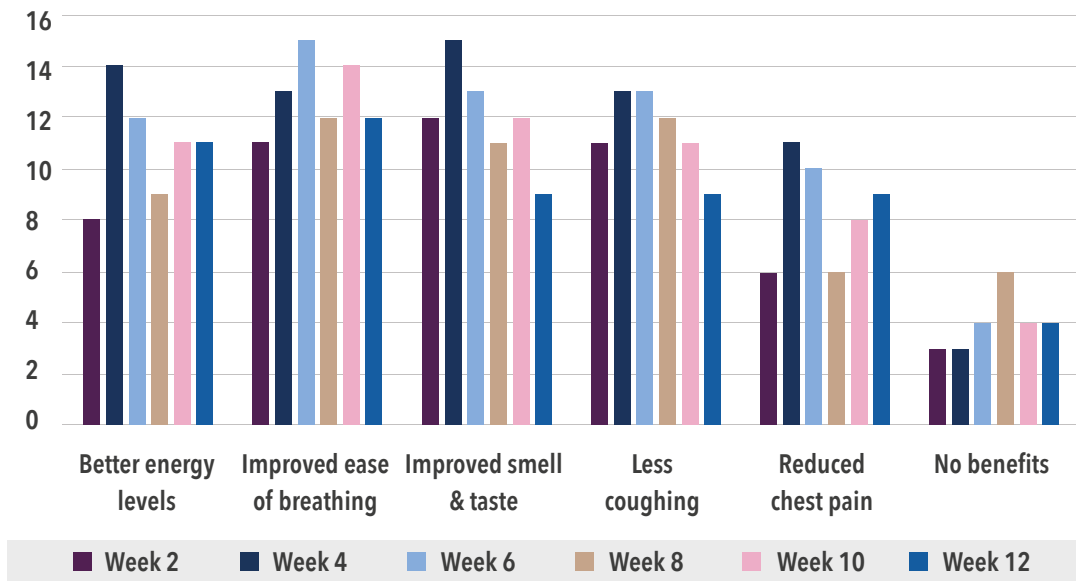
In the weeks that followed, more people reported that they felt they had experienced these and other changes. Overall, they reported that their chest pain appeared to have completely disappeared, their energy levels

seemed to have increased, and their breathing felt easier. Symptoms like headaches, nausea and dizziness also appeared to decrease, by 66%, 80% and 75% respectively over the challenge period.

As the challenge progressed, 39% of participants changed their devices, while 60% opted for different e-liquid flavours and 44% chose e-liquids with a different nicotine strength than they had initially begun the challenge with.

Regarding why they chose another flavour, a respondent shared that the restlessness of not smoking made them curious about different flavours, while someone else revealed that the tobacco flavour initially provided made them feel nauseous. Flavour favourites amongst the cohort included fruity (42%), tobacco (21%) and mint (16%). **Eighty percent of those who changed flavours said that they would not have had the same success if the vapes were flavourless.**

PERCEIVED HEALTH BENEFITS



One of the participants explained that they had sought e-liquids with an increased nicotine level so as to try to vape less and another shared that they had decreased their nicotine concentration to help them stop vaping altogether.

The vast majority of participants, 82%, reported that they had substantially reduced their cigarette intake. Additionally, 68% said they spent less money over the 12-week period than they would have if they had continued to smoke only, with 36% sharing that they spent between R101 and R500 less. Nine percent even said they reduced their spending by over R2,000!

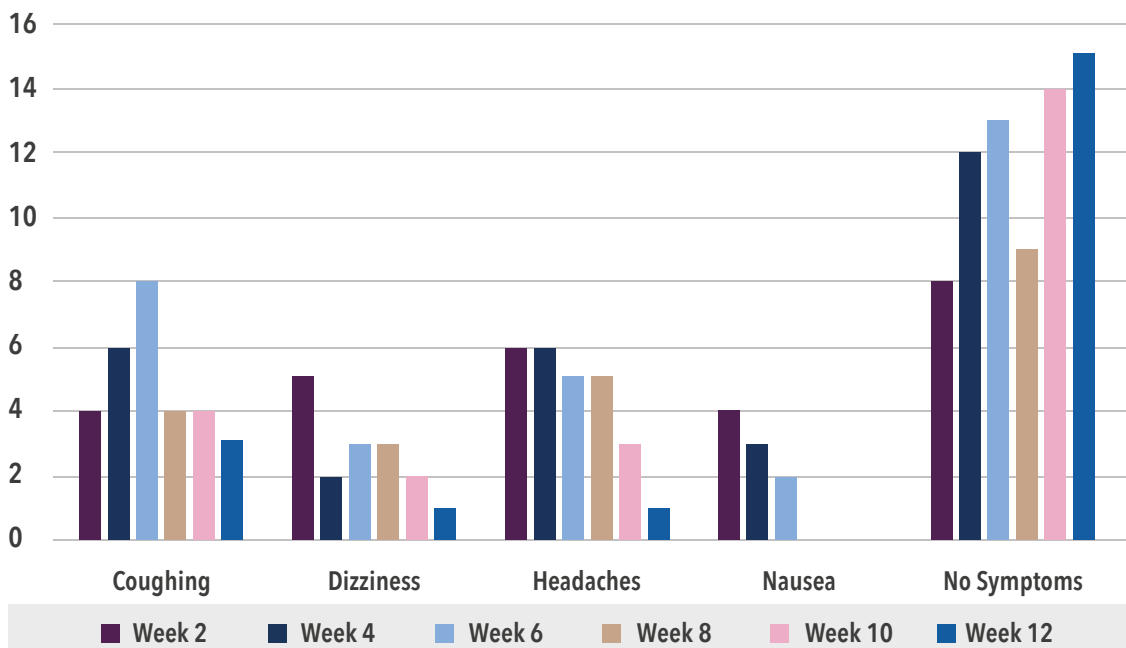
Asked about the challenges they encountered while trying to switch, 29% said they experienced stress, 19% battled not to smoke in social

situations and 14% struggled to make the switch from smoking.

By the last week, 58% had quit their smoking habit entirely. Of the remaining 42% of participants who had not managed to give up cigarettes entirely, 79% reported an overall reduction in the number of cigarettes they smoked.

These results appear to be consistent with the findings of other studies, such as Smets, et al. (2019), which reported that a substantial majority of participants (83%) in their study had reported health improvements since they had started vaping and that they were able to quit smoking (81%) or even substantially reduce their smoking consumption (85%)¹⁵.

SYMPTOMS FROM SMOKING



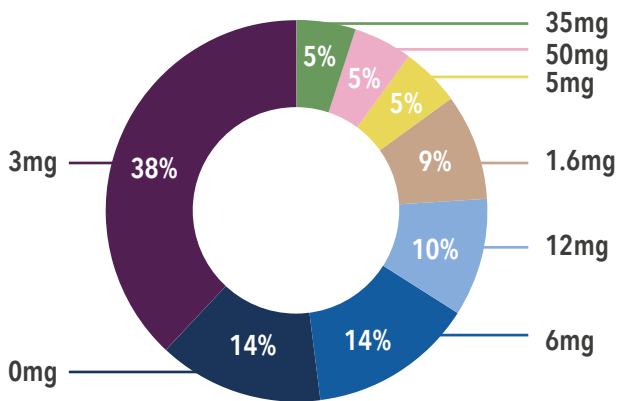
POST-CHALLENGE

A few weeks after the challenge concluded, participants were asked to complete a close-out survey which revealed that nine of the 22 respondents (41%) had remained off cigarettes. Reasons given by those who had returned to cigarettes ranged from stress and the cost of vaping products, to not being completely ready to break the habit. However, among those who had relapsed, 46% shared that although they still smoke a little, it is significantly less than the amount they smoked pre-challenge.

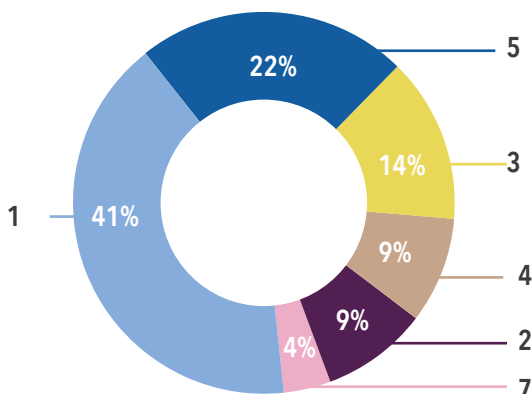
Those who managed to remain off cigarettes after the challenge were asked why they felt they were able to not return to cigarettes. One respondent explained, *"I had an alternative way of satisfying my nicotine fix. I was able to quit as I believed that vaping increased my health in a positive way while still enjoying the joys of smoking."* Another added, *"Vaping truly helped, the support from mentors and the group was amazing."* A third shared, *"I have stopped smoking entirely due to e-cigarettes and vape juice substituting the craving for smoking cigarettes. This has helped me kick smoking cigarettes altogether now."*

Among the participants who continued vaping without smoking post-challenge, an impressive 14% reported that they were on zero-nicotine products. The largest slice of the pie, 38%, said they are using products with a nicotine strength of 3mg and 14% are on 6mg.

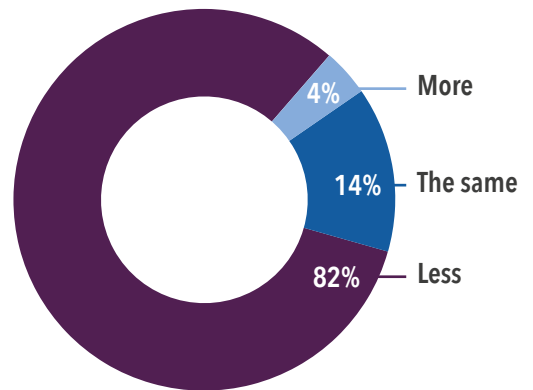
WHAT NICOTINE STRENGTH YOU ARE USING NOW THAT THE CHALLENGE IS COMPLETE?



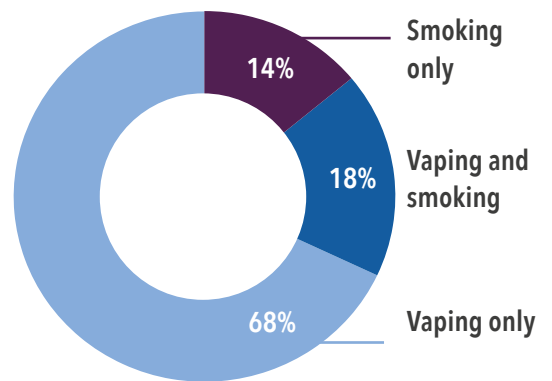
EASE OF SWITCHING COMPARED TO PREVIOUS METHODS



ARE YOU SMOKING MORE OR LESS THAN YOU WOULD'VE WITHOUT THE CHALLENGE?



POST-CHALLENGE SURVEY: PREFERENCE GOING FORWARD



As for whether having a mentor helped them on their quitting journeys, 64% said yes. On their experience, a respondent shared, *"I would ask for advice whenever I got confused and she would respond regardless of the time."* Someone else remarked, *"Just knowing I had someone believing that I could do it was all I needed."* Another added: *"I was educated more on the use of vaping than I had known before. And I believe that without the mentors and this group, I wouldn't have this much knowledge."*

Those who had tried to quit smoking before were asked to rank how the approach taken in the 12-week challenge (i.e., vaping combined with mentorship) compared to their previous attempts on a scale of one to ten where one was much easier and ten was much harder. Forty-one percent ranked the challenge at one out of ten, 22% at five out of ten and 14% at three out of ten.

All of the close-out survey participants stated that they would recommend switching to vaping to friends or family members who smoke as a means of reducing their risks from smoking or helping them quit smoking entirely. Several shared that they had already assisted family members, co-workers and friends in making the switch. One even said, *"I believe I'm living proof that when a person stops smoking, they will feel 10, if not 100, times better."*

Going forward, 68% of those who completed the close-out survey indicated that they would carry on vaping, 18% would be smoking and vaping and 14% would just be smoking.

TESTIMONIALS

Here's what some of the participants had to say after completing the challenge:

"I am so grateful to have been part of this amazing challenge. It has brought so much positivity to my life now being smoke-free."

- Krugersdorp-based ex-smoker who quit after 18 years

"I haven't smoked for 76 days and will never smoke again!"

- Former smoker of 17 years from Vereeniging who previously spent between R501 and R1,000 weekly on her habit

"I'm just so grateful for not smoking cigarettes anymore with the help of Mzansi Make the Switch and really feeling the difference [I believe] it has made to my health."

- Kraaifontein resident who smoked for 28 years and spent between R1,000 and R2,000 weekly on cigarettes

"Without a doubt vaping is the answer to help smokers quit tobacco."

- Durbanite who smoked for 28 years and had previously tried quitting 'cold turkey'

"I am glad to say that I no longer smoke cigarettes. And I have not vaped for 12 days and going strong."

- Lenasia-based man who was a smoker for 11 years and had never tried quitting before

"The Mzansi Make the Switch programme has changed my perception of vaping and life. I am in a better space today. Thank you."

- Johannesburg South resident who had smoked for 10 years and had previously tried to stop by using Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRTs)

"In my opinion, vaping is not healthy, but 90% healthier than cigarettes and a gateway to be cigarette-free which I have been for a month now. I can definitely see vast changes in my physical appearance and health."

- Capetonian who had smoked for 26 years

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON VAPING AND HARM REDUCTION

Consider the views below from some of the world's leading tobacco harm reduction (THR) experts, in light of what our social experiment has shown and compared to the future that the Tobacco Bill proposes for South Africa:



"There is clear evidence that vapes are substantially less harmful to health than smoking and are an effective tool to help smokers quit." - **Neil O'Brien, Minister for Public Health, United Kingdom (10 May 2023)**¹⁶



"The biggest threat to the UK's world-beating harm reduction strategy comes from the World Health Organization, whose singular mission on this seems to be focused on actively encouraging countries to ban vaping as part of its tobacco control approach, purposefully flouting the evidence of vaping's success." - **Mary Glendon, UK MP & Vice-Chair of the multi-party Parliamentary Group on Vaping (28 April 2023)**¹⁷



"Countries seeking to beat smoking like Sweden did should embrace harm reduction strategies, such as [by] allowing adult smokers who cannot or will not quit to switch to smoke-free alternatives." - **Harm reduction specialists Dr Anders Milton, Prof. Karl Fagerström & Dr Delon Human, 2023 Smoke Free Sweden Report (14 March 2023)**¹⁸



"Personally, I think the key is to do [vapour product consumption] legally. If you think it's about people's way of life, it is the civil liberty of the people. It's something people can accept." - **Chaiwut Thanakmanuson, Minister of Digital Economy & Society in Thailand (2 February 2023)**¹⁹



"When you have a prohibitive or restrictive policy [covering vapour products] people find workarounds. So, you will get a black market... You have to have an alternative. You have to have a freely available vaping market which people can switch to." - **Assoc. Prof. Colin Mendelsohn, University of New South Wales & Chair of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (15 December 2022)**²⁰



"Alternative tobacco products are innovations born from advances in technology to help adult smokers who have had difficulty quitting their habit. For this reason, this product must be supported by regulations that regulate aspects of production, distribution, advertising and consumption, not just excise rates so that it can play a role in reducing the prevalence and dangers of smoking." - **Derek Prayudi, Executive Director of Masindo's Centre of Youth & Population (an Indonesian risk awareness society) (25 October 2022)**²¹



"Treating them [traditional cigarettes and new reduced risk products] as the same in terms of public health is a serious mistake, as the message to smokers is that both products have the same impact on their health and therefore removes any incentive to consider switching to less harmful alternatives when other attempts to quit have failed. Making these products equal in terms of access restrictions of any kind for adults, taxation, properties and image to conventional tobacco will only result in thousands of people continuing to smoke and, unfortunately, becoming ill and dying." - **Clive Bates, Peter Hajek, David T. Swenor, Lion Shahab & 166 other tobacco harm reduction experts (27 October 2022)**²²



"Most African countries have only minimal - if any - resources for tobacco control. But tobacco harm reduction is a low-cost intervention for governments since the research and development costs are borne by manufacturers and the purchase costs are met by consumers. In addition, as well as helping smokers to become smoke-free, [reduced risk products (RRPs)] have the potential to prevent the uptake of smoking in the first place... an approach to reducing smoking that includes a wide range of THR products would provide governments in the region with the tools to significantly improve health outcomes at minimal cost. Governments should regulate [RRPs] appropriately, ensuring that higher risk tobacco products are always less economically attractive." - **Gerry Stimson, Honorary Professor of Sociology, Imperial College London (15 September 2022)**²³



"We do know that e-cigarettes - as a general class - have markedly less risk than a combustible cigarette product." - **Brian King, Director of the US Food & Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products (26 September 2022)**²⁴



"There needs to be a credible harm reduction strategy as practised by many developed countries. The authorities must consider regulating a safer alternative such as vape and make it accessible to smokers wanting to quit." - **Dr Delon Human, Co-founder & Director of the Africa Harm Reduction Alliance (4 September 2022)**²⁵



"I think it would be irresponsible for states not to support society with harm reduction strategies, especially those that are already known. It is the duty of every government to implement policies that support or have benefits for public health".
- **Dr Andrzej Fal, Institute of Medical Science director, Cardinal Wyszyński University, President of the Polish Society of Public Health (4 April 2022)**²⁶



"Harm reduction strategies have been implemented and have shown to be effective in injectable drug users and people with alcohol use disorders. Harm reduction strategies often replaced strategies for complete abstinence in certain sub-groups of users: poly drug users, people with psychiatric co-morbidities, socially and economically [marginalised] groups... There were no alternatives to combustible cigarettes when [the] WHO FCTC [Framework Convention on Tobacco Control] was adopted in 2005, except nicotine-replacement therapy... But now we have many other alternatives based on technology, that are alternate supplies of nicotine without combustion." - **Dr Kgosi Letlape, Africa Medical Association (AfMA) President & Africa Harm Reduction Alliance President (10 October 2021)**²⁷



"The 'quit or die' approach... does not work for some smokers. Therefore, it is time to consider the 'quit or try' approach; that is, try alternative nicotine products. We need to actively inform policymakers about tobacco harm reduction and the potential benefit of alternative nicotine products to public health." - **Dr Drg Amaliya, Co-founder of the Indonesian Public Health Observer Foundation (14 November 2018)**²⁸

CONCLUSION

The experiment demonstrated that vaping could serve as a viable method for helping individuals quit or reduce their smoking. Additionally, the immediate feedback from participants that they felt their health had improved is likely an important feedback mechanism that supports successful quit attempts through vaping. As a result, vaping should be further explored as a potentially feasible tool for harm reduction in South Africa.

The results of this compelling experiment unequivocally point towards participants having had vastly different experiences with vaping and smoking, potentially showing that policies and legislation should explore or seek to acknowledge this distinction.

Moreover, while the Tobacco Products & Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill seeks to prohibit all flavours used in vapes, with the exception of tobacco and nicotine flavours, the testimonials and responses collected during this experiment in fact highlight the role of flavours in helping participants stick to vaping (instead of returning to smoking). This confirms the findings of various scientific studies^{29,30} which have found flavours to be critical to helping people switch from smoking to vaping. Together, these demonstrate why VSML does not believe that a one-size-fits-all approach will work.

Throughout the challenge period, the mentors (comprised of vape store owners and employees – all of whom themselves are previous smokers who have used vaping to quit cigarettes) equipped the participants with evidence-based information on the benefits of vaping as a harm reduction tool to help them make informed decisions as well as to address concerns and misconceptions. They also provided practical tips for making the transition and educated them on choosing the best devices, flavours and nicotine strengths to do so. Additionally, the mentors shared their own quitting journeys and offered advice, support and motivation. This was cited as a key factor in the majority of participants' success. And, while it is accepted that retailers are definitely not qualified cessation experts in a formal sense, their life experience and knowledge could and should prove invaluable in assisting smokers, which has been shown in this experiment³¹.

However, with the proposed Bill prohibiting store owners and employees from providing any information to consumers about different or new vape items, or even about vaping being less harmful than smoking, this will surely undermine the efforts of anyone who approaches them wanting to quit or reduce their cigarette consumption. As a result, this will only have negative consequences for smokers' switching/quitting journeys.

Further, it is important to note that the challenge occurred in the period when the flat excise duty rate of R2.90 per millilitre for nicotine and non-nicotine vaping liquids was reported widely in news media and in fact came into effect during the challenge period. Concerns about how this would impact the affordability of e-liquids played a key role not only in the challenge's drop-out rate, but also led to several participants reporting that they, sadly, had switched back to cigarettes as a result.

**BREAK
AWAY**
FROM THE PACK

Join the
VAPING

12 Week Challenge

#MzansiMakeTheSwitch

A NOTE ON THE TOBACCO PRODUCTS & ELECTRONIC DELIVERY SYSTEMS CONTROL BILL OF 2022

Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Health has given individuals and relevant stakeholders until 4 September 2023 to submit written comments. To help South Africans understand how the regulations contained within the Bill could impact them and make it easier for them to share their concerns, VSML has developed an online submission form which delivers submissions directly to Parliament.

This is a critical piece of legislation and, if passed unchanged, will have a significant impact on people's choices and liberties.

If you are interested in making a submission, visit vsml.co.za/submission-bill-2022

For more information, go to vsml.co.za

For a clearer view on the scientific research around tobacco harm reduction and vaping, visit vsml.co.za/research-library



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