MEDIA RELEASE

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Government’s response to e-cigarettes inquiry another win for public health and a short, sharp blow to the tobacco industry

Health groups welcome strengthening of the precautionary position

Leading independent health groups have commended the Australian Government’s response to a parliamentary inquiry on electronic cigarettes for prioritising “public health over commercial interests and evidence over lobbying”.

The Australian Council on Smoking and Health, Cancer Council Australia, National Heart Foundation Australia and Public Health Association of Australia have welcomed the official response and its strengthening of Australia’s precautionary position on e-cigarettes.

It follows recent restrictions on the importation of liquid nicotine and an interim decision from the independent Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to reject a tobacco industry application to relax poison controls and greenlight the sale of novelty tobacco products being heavily promoted to young people in the US.

Maurice Swanson, Chief Executive, Australian Council on Smoking and Health, said the Government’s position had not wavered from the evidence or the TGA’s statutory independence – despite relentless lobbying from the tobacco and e-cigarette industries and ongoing attempts to water down policy safeguards in Australia.

“The vast majority of Australia’s leading health and medical organisations also support the precautionary position, because that’s what the evidence tells us,” Mr Swanson said.

Much of the lobbying, especially the coordinated attempts to erode Australia’s health protections, have been from the tobacco and e-cigarette industries and other groups whose sole interest is trying to make money from e-cigarettes. The Government’s response to the parliamentary inquiry prioritises public health over commercial interests and evidence over lobbying.

John Kelly, Group CEO of the Heart Foundation, said Minister Hunt should be congratulated for protecting the health of young Australians. “It should also be noted that the Minister defers to independent statutory agencies – the TGA for assessment of products claiming a therapeutic benefit and the National Health and Medical Research Council for reviewing the evidence. These are pillars of the health system, invulnerable to lobbying, independently advising the Minister and his Department as they always have.”

Libby Jardine, Chair of Cancer Council Australia’s Tobacco Issues Committee, said current government data shows that the largest relative growth in e-cigarette use by demographic is in young non-smokers.

“In the three years up to 2016, lifetime e-cigarette use in non-smoking 18 to 24-year-olds almost tripled from 5% to just under 14% and from 2.1% to 6.2% in 12 to 17-year-olds. The tobacco industry and other e-cigarette salespeople have been working relentlessly to
increase these usage levels in young Australians – while spouting unfounded claims about the benefits of e-cigarettes in smoking cessation.

“Australian authorities' reliance on the evidence, and the resilience of our political leaders in the face of constant lobbying, have protected young Australians from the sort of e-cigarette onslaught reported in countries without these policy safeguards.”

Ms Jardine said that all nine governments and health departments in Australia had committed to strengthening the protection of young people from the promotion of e-cigarettes and that the string of recent reforms, statements and closing of loopholes would assist coordination of effort.

Terry Slevin, Chief Executive Officer of the Public Health Association of Australia, said e-cigarettes were also a harmful distraction from evidence-based measures to reduce the health harms of tobacco use.

“While the industry lobbying and tactics are getting no traction with evidence-based health authorities, they are sucking up much of the public interest in tobacco control. A strength of the Government’s response to the parliamentary inquiry is its brevity. Pro e-cigarette claims were not supported by the evidence and our statutory authorities will review and advise on that evidence – not commercial interests. End of story.”

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