

The tobacco endgame: targeting the next generation



In April, tobacco control advocates and experts gathered at the 2023 European Conference on Tobacco or Health (ECToH) with the theme of how to achieve a tobacco-free generation by 2040. Given one in two people who smoke will die of a smoking-related disease, many of the discussions centred on how the tobacco endgame can become a reality.

One key strategy will be to ensure that children and adolescents avoid using tobacco-containing or nicotine-containing products, and many discussions at ECToH were focused on how to engage with, and protect, this generation. As proposed in a recent ERS statement, one tactic could be to raise the age of buying cigarettes to 21 years; currently only four countries globally—USA, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Kuwait—have such an age rule. And, as the statement noted, US Department of Health data report that 90% of smokers start smoking before 18 years; a statistic that highlights how crucial it is to prevent children and adolescents from taking up these products if a tobacco-free world is to be achieved. With commercial revenues for tobacco-containing products under attack following increasing legislation and higher taxes, companies have also realised the importance of targeting young people. In Sweden, for example, industry efforts are now focused on the marketing of tobacco-free nicotine pouches using tactics mirroring those used to promote cigarettes in the 1970s and 1980s. Pouches are being touted as harm reduction products and marketed in a way to target not just current smokers, but also young people, with heavy promotion by social media influencers and as a glamour product. However, the pouches can have very high nicotine concentrations thereby ensuring a new generation becomes addicted to nicotine, with the consequent negative effects on developing brains.

Many ongoing initiatives to educate and engage with children and adolescents were discussed at ECToH. A storytelling project in schools, overseen by the Portuguese League Against Cancer, asked participants aged 10–18 years to write stories on their experiences and knowledge about tobacco. In Sweden, young ambassadors have hosted educational interactive sessions in schools on the use of tobacco and snus, and in the Netherlands, notices in playgrounds and schools promote the protection of children. One ECToH session, was

arranged specifically for youth with 450 attendees from the local community, highlighting the potential impact of mobilising youth advocates for tobacco control.

An area in which children and adolescents are especially vulnerable is the uptake of electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS); the CDC estimate there are currently around 2.5 million teenagers using ENDS. However, there have been encouraging recent preventive efforts. On May 2, 2023, Australia introduced plans for new controls on the importation, contents, and packaging of vaping products and in April, Juul Labs was forced to settle lawsuits totalling around half a billion US dollars filed by six US states and the District of Columbia over the marketing of e-cigarettes to teenagers.

However, a fracturing of opinions within the tobacco control community related to the use of ENDS has occurred, which could undermine efforts and be exploited by those with commercial interests. Some advocates are arguing passionately that the community is taking their eye off the ball by focusing on ENDS use in youth, given the number of smokers who are dying each year; there are 1.3 billion people using tobacco worldwide resulting in 8.0 million deaths per year. Of course, continuing to target current smokers with strategies such as the “swap to stop” UK initiative that will provide a million smokers with free vape kits is crucial, but the community needs to also provide a united front to tackle the continued underhand tactics of commercial entities. Furthermore, Neal L Benowitz and colleagues note a lack of regulated smoking cessation products and call on the US FDA to support more innovation in this area, whereas Adam Edward Lang and Ivan Berlin discuss the implications of the recent withdrawal of varenicline from the market by Pfizer due to nitrosamine contamination and the importance of health-care infrastructures to have alternative support measures in place, such as the use of generics.

Protecting children and adolescents is essential to meet the tobacco endgame. Continued efforts on price points and point of sales will also help in this respect. As one delegate noted: “We all want an end to tobacco, but we need to think about these new products that adolescents are starting to smoke where companies are recruiting the next generation of addicted customers”.

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For more on the **ERS statement** see *Eur Respir J* 2023; **61**: 2300134

For more on the **Australian vaping plans** see *World Report Lancet* 2023; **401**: 1557

For more on the **settlement of the lawsuits for e-cigarette marketing to teenagers** see *News Lancet Respir Med* 2023; **11**: e56

For the **Perspective on how the FDA can help in smoking cessation** see *N Engl J Med* 2023; **388**: 1540–42

For more on the **availability of varenicline** see *Spotlight Lancet Respir Med* 2023; **11**: 518

For more on the **“swap to stop” UK initiative** see *News Lancet Oncol* 2023; **24**: 437