

MSHR advises govt to reassess GEG, form independent science-based vaping committee

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Society for Harm Reduction (MSHR) called on the government to re-assess Generation Endgame (GEG) measure, especially on vape, given its potential in helping to reduce smoking prevalence in Malaysia.

MSHR chairman professor Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh said more smokers are switching to vaping to quit smoking cigarettes.

However, local studies have shown that many vape users are smokers and that the occurrence of non-smokers using vape is very rare.

"In addition, the top reasons cited in the study are that vape users are using them to quit smoking cigarettes (88 per cent) or cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke (91 per cent).

"The potential of vape in reducing smoking prevalence is huge in Malaysia and cannot be ignored," she said in a statement today.

Dr Sharifa said that this would reduce the number of smokers in the long run. Based on estimates, the rate of smokers in Malaysia will decrease from five million in 2019 to four million in 2025 due to various reasons, including the use of vape.

These statistics are in line with data from several countries that look to vape as a strategy to reduce the risk of smoking cigarettes, in addition to nicotine replacement therapy, Dr Sharifa, who is also a community health physician and health economics specialist from the Faculty of Medicine Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), said.

Last week, prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim stated that the government supported towards GEG initiative during the Budget 2023 tabling.

Dr Sharifa said MSHR believes that GEG can be counter-productive, as it positions vape to be equally harmful as cigarettes and tobacco.

She said this would send the wrong message to smokers, who might be deterred from switching to vape.

MSHR suggest that the government regulate vape and provide training to vendors on proper switching to NRT (nicotine replacement therapy) and vape if necessary.

It is also wise to establish and form an independent committee that is driven by science and evidence to conduct in-depth research and studies on vape products.

Dr Sharifa said it is important that the government is advised by independent health experts and makes the decision based on science and evidence.

"While vaping has health risks, we cannot ignore scientific evidence that vaping is at least 95 per cent less harmful than smoking.

"Several reputable public health organisations have made that estimate and endorsed by multiple developed countries. In addition, vape is also recognised as an effective tool to reduce smoking hazards and rates," she said.

"If we look at the decline in the smoking rates in countries with higher vaping rates, it speeds up as the vaping rate increase," Dr Sharifa said.

She pointed out that in 2013, Australia had a lower smoking rate than the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand.

However, once the US, UK and New Zealand endorsed vaping as a harm-reduction tool, smoking rates declined significantly in these countries as compared to only 0.3 per cent in Australia.

MSHR also urge the government to introduce regulations under existing laws to regulate vape products quickly.

This is to ensure the products are regulated and to prevent misuse and abuse of the products as well as prevent access by the underage.

"Legislative process for the new bill will take a lengthy time. In addition, a bill should only be tabled with detailed discussion and studies on the proposed GEG measure that the previous minister proposed.

"Given this, we believe the government should take immediate steps to regulate vape products using existing laws to speed up regulations on the products to protect consumers from prohibited ingredients by introducing standards on the product as well as prohibiting access by minors," Dr Sharifa said.