

OPINION: TOBACCO HARM REDUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN – AN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

The Vapour Products Association South Africa (VPASA) and its members have taken note of the 21-day lockdown announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa on 23 March 2020. VPASA welcomes and supports these measures, believing they will make a significant contribution to reducing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

VPASA is, however, concerned that the list of permitted products gazetted on 25 March 2020 is too restrictive and fails to take account of tobacco harm reduction. We are disappointed that the government has not made provision for the sale of electronic cigarettes and other harm-reduction products, either in supermarkets and pharmacies that will remain open during the lockdown, or through online platforms.

The lockdown will not, unfortunately, serve to erase nicotine addiction. Consequently, it is highly likely that nicotine vapers will be inclined to either procure black market vapes, manufacture their own, or revert to smoking illicit products, all of which pose varying levels of harm to their health. The June 2019 outbreak of lung disease in the United States, which led to the deaths of 69 people, should serve as a pertinent reminder: the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that those who were affected had vaped black market tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) products cut with vitamin E acetate. These products had been hawked by unscrupulous players.

In South Africa, we already know that such unprincipled merchants have cost the fiscus billions of rands by selling illicit tobacco products at prices that make tobacco cheap and affordable to young people. We also know that the government has struggled to control this trade, either through incapacity, lack of political will, or corruption within state institutions charged with its policing.

As evidence has shown, many nicotine consumers are either unable or unwilling to kick the habit and, increasingly, many are resorting to vaping as a harm-reduction alternative. Our view is that the government should urgently consider allowing some restricted trade in vaping products, either via limited opening hours for shops, supermarkets and pharmacies, or existing online platforms. None of these options will contribute to people congregating unnecessarily if designed and implemented correctly. As such, we appeal to the government to make the necessary amendments to the gazetted regulations to exempt shops and traders of electronic vapour products from the lockdown in order to enable vapers access to these products.

While our appeal may be controversial among non-vapers, it is not a unique proposition as South Africa would be following the lead of countries such as not only Italy and Greece, but also the United Kingdom and Canada, all of which took the decision to allow vaping shops to continue trading either through their physical stores or existing online platforms. These governments



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recognise that tobacco harm reduction remains an important element of public health policy even in times of crisis.

There is conclusive scientific evidence that vaping products are significantly less harmful alternatives to tobacco. The lockdown policy should reflect this reality, and not prohibit access to these items at this very stressful time.

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