

Vaping should form part of South Africa's public health harm reduction strategy

Media Statement

For immediate release

Pretoria, Monday, 30 May 2022: Despite acknowledgment by the South African government that harm reduction is a tool to limit “the damage caused to individuals and communities who have already succumbed to the temptation of substances” in its National Drug Master Plan (NDMP), the country still finds itself without a clearly defined and inclusive harm reduction strategy.

The global community recognises vaping as an effective harm reduction tool in addressing the many social challenges faced by communities including nicotine addiction. It is also important to note that many of these tools require multi-layered interventions that encourage the use of less harmful techniques or alternatives for example using vaping, which releases aerosol instead of tobacco which releases smoke.

“The South African economy would benefit significantly from an inclusive harm reduction strategy that drives economic transformation by introducing policies that address the country’s multiple socio-economic imbalances starting with fair vaping industry regulations and acknowledging vaping as a less harmful alternative to smoking cigarettes,” says Asanda Gcoyi, CEO of Vapour Products Association of South Africa (VPASA).

Emerging economies including South Africa are faced with many socio-economic and environmental challenges including the extensive availability of harmful substances and disposable waste. This puts a strain on the country’s public health system and environmental wellbeing due to the increasing number of non-communicable diseases such as cancer and tuberculosis. Harm reduction strategies are needed now more than ever to help manage, prevent, and identify negative behaviour including nicotine addictions associated with harmful substances.

The UK Royal College of Physicians has found that vaping is far less harmful than combustible tobacco, further noting that the hazard to health arising from long-term vapour inhalation is unlikely to exceed 5% of the harm from smoking tobacco.

As many countries including the UK are leaning toward becoming a smoke-free community by 2030, research reports indicate that vaping is set to play a critical role in defining harm reduction policies. South Africa needs to take harm reduction seriously as part of addressing its contentious issues including fighting non-communicable diseases, climate change, poverty and job creation.

With the growing body of global scientific evidence that continues to prove that vape aerosol is less harmful than tobacco smoke, it is becoming clearer that smoking alternatives are necessary to reduce both environmental and physical related harm. South Africa needs a clearly defined harm reduction strategy that provides a foundational structure for policy, programmes, and practices with scientific-based evidence to help regulate harmful substances across the entire value chain. This will open doors for industry innovation and introduce fresh ideas for industries to thrive including the vaping sector.

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