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## More creative approach

Maybe it's about time that our government accept the fact that Filipinos are not about to give up smoking and that the only way to help them is to support more practical approaches.

A study by the World Health Organization (WHO) has shown that the Philippines continues to have one of the highest rates of smoking in Asia.

The Philippines is ranked in the top 15 countries worldwide with the highest burden of tobacco-related illnesses, losing nearly P270 million in tobacco usage –related costs including healthcare and productivity loss from illnesses and mortality and with over 100,000 Filipinos dying annually from smoking-related diseases.

These have triggered a growing number of medical practitioners and civic organizations to appeal for wider access to electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), which are said to be 95 percent less harmful than conventional cigarettes, according to a study commissioned by Public Health England.

Research published by the New England Journal of Medicine has concluded that e-cigarettes were more effective in helping smokers quit compared to nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products such as nicotine patches, gums, and lozenges.

The study assessed close to 900 individuals that sought support from the UK National Health Service for smoking cessation. After one year, 18 percent of e-cigarette users had successfully quit smoking compared to 9.9 percent of those using NRTs. In addition, more e-cigarette users reduced their smoking by at least 50 percent; e-cigarette users also reported higher satisfaction and rated the device as more helpful than NRTs.

The results of this study, together with the reduced risk claim reiterated by Public Health England, has prompted local advocacy groups to urge our Department of Health to reconsider its stance on ENDS, and consider them as a viable means to curb the tobacco epidemic in the country.

Shifting to the use of ENDS can reduce massive healthcare spending, which could instead be reallocated to the country's new Universal Healthcare Act, which seeks to provide better access to healthcare services for all Filipinos.

Countries like the United Kingdom and Canada, where e-cigarettes are regulated, are seeing significant reductions in smoking prevalence, and a resulting decrease in tobacco-related deaths.

The Quezon City government, through an ordinance, has regulated e-cigarattes use in public places, imposing sanctions on the sale and distribution of e-cigarettes to minors. Let us hope other LGUs follow to support the national government's mission to enact a national smoking cessation program.

### From the readers

I am an 87 years old retired R & D scientist who smoked strong, unfiltered cigarettes for 69 years before making this change in 2012, some seven years ago. At that time, I was diagnosed with chronic

obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), the same disease which caused the death of my only son at the age of 47.

On being given a lung function test it showed a breathing rate of only 50 percent of normal. On searching the Internet, I could find no evidence of the possible effects of vaping on my lungs, so I became a guinea pig by arranging with my GP to have annual lung function tests in order to find out.

My breathing rate improved to 80 percent after 18 months, 82 percent at three years, 88 percent at four years, and 88 percent at years 5 and 6, showing it had stabilized, resulting in my health and quality of life improving dramatically, whilst still satisfying my nicotine dependency. Chest infections have been reduced. This demonstrates the body's remarkable recuperative properties in only four years, despite abuse over 69 years! It will never reach 100 percent because of the irrevocable damage caused to my alveoli by smoking.

For many the electronic cigarette has proved to be the most effective nicotine delivery system ever developed, allowing hardened smokers to change from smoking tobacco, to vaping nicotine, both quickly and effectively. As a smoker I find it easy to see why. It addresses most of the elements which give pleasure to smokers, and one does not feel they have irrevocably stopped smoking but merely changed one cigarette for a much safer type.

Over the past four years, as my health improved, I became an active advocate for vaping. Recently, I was invited to attend a three-day Global Forum on Nicotine in Warsaw, the theme of which was Harm Reduction – Saving Lives. The organizers agreed to my wish to meet Hon Lik, who was to give the opening address. I thanked him for improving the quality, and length of my remaining years and his closing remark was that he felt I would be the first vaper to reach the age of 100.

There can be no doubt that for those of us cannot, or choose not to live without our daily nicotine fix, and wish to enjoy the tactile, oral and psychological elements associated with smoking, electronic cigarettes are a much safer alternative, being orders of magnitude less dangerous to our health than inhaling the products of combustion arising from smoking tobacco.

The take up of this relatively new device has been phenomenal, world – wide and possibly highest per capita, in this country at three million, due, partially, to the governments laissez faire attitude towards vaping. In other countries smokers are denied the benefits of using this harm reduction technique, due to harsh regulation e.g. (USA) and outright ban as in Australia. ONS latest figures show the lowest ever recorded for smoking in the UK at 15.6 percent.

The UK government is the first in the world to formally recognize the importance of this ground breaking harm reduction technique. As part of its aim for a Smoke Free Generation by 2020, the Department of Health recently issued its five-year Tobacco Control Plan which, inter alia, hints at the future prescription of electronic cigarettes, something I forecast two years ago. NICE are currently consulting on how the medical profession can best introduce this new device into their Nicotine Replacement Therapy armory.

The Select Committee on Science and Technology was recently tasked by Parliament to advise them on the use of electronic cigarettes, my research being accepted as written evidence. They concluded in favor of vaping.

Electronic cigarettes are improving the quality, and length of life of millions of people both in the UK and worldwide, with latest estimate of 33 million vapers. Hon Lik's innovative device now affords us, for the first time, the opportunity to break the scourge of tobacco and realize a smoke free future for our children, surely a worthy legacy. – Terry Walker