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Filipinos in WHO's list of top smokers in Asia

DESPITE stepped up efforts from the government to get Filipinos to quit smoking, a study by the World Health Organization shows 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. The country loses nearly PhP 270 million in tobacco-usage related costs, which includes healthcare and productivity loss from illnesses and mortality. Over 100,000 Filipinos die annually from smoking-related diseases such as lung cancer and heart failure.

As such, the Department of Health (DOH) refers to continued tobacco dependence as a “key development issue that impacts well-being, productivity, and overall quality of life.”

These alarming statistics 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% less harmful than conventional cigarettes, according to a study commissioned by Public Health England.

Results of recent research published by the New England Journal of Medicine 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% 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 the DOH 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.

Locally, Quezon City, through City Ordinance 2737-2018, has begun to regulate the use of e-cigarettes in public places to protect the overall welfare of its constituents. Sanctions, particularly on the sale and distribution of e-cigarettes to minors, have been included in the regulation to deter underage smoking.

With the growing information supporting the efficacy of ENDS, other local government units are considering regulating e-cigarettes in their respective localities to support the government's mission to enact a national smoking cessation program.