

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Harm Reduction Australia backs tobacco harm reduction**

From the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, Australians will legally be able to purchase nicotine vaping products from participating pharmacies. While an improvement on previous legislation which required people to acquire a medical prescription to purchase a vape, this approach remains inadequate and imposes significant barriers for people seeking alternatives to deadly cigarettes.

Tobacco harm reduction focuses on directly minimising the harm associated with smoking without necessarily eliminating nicotine consumption altogether. This approach is explicitly endorsed in Australia's National Drug Strategy and is also supported by Australia's commitment as a signatory to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. However, despite these endorsements, Australia has staunchly opposed tobacco harm reduction in practice.

Countries like New Zealand, the UK, Sweden, and Japan have seen an accelerated decline in smoking rates by embracing tobacco harm reduction. By contrast, since 2011, Australia has imposed stricter regulations on vaping – a much safer alternative to smoking. This is particularly concerning given that cigarettes, which are responsible for the deaths of up to two out of every three long-term smokers, remain readily available from over 40,000 outlets across the country.

Each year, smoking causes the deaths of 21,000 Australians, a toll greater than the combined fatalities from all other psychoactive drugs (including alcohol, prescription drugs, and illicit substances), along with HIV, suicide, and road crashes. Smoking remains the leading preventable cause of death and disease, both in Australia and globally. It also significantly contributes to economic inequality and health disparities, disproportionately affecting poorer communities. Many people struggling with alcohol and other drug issues also smoke heavily, and often go on to die from smoking-related conditions.

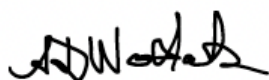
Globally, four reduced-risk nicotine products are now available for those who are unable or unwilling to quit: vaping, heated tobacco products, snus, and nicotine pouches. However, Australia's resistance to adopting these harm reduction measures has led to a burgeoning black market for illicit nicotine products, characterised by increasing violence similar to that seen in illicit drug markets. There have been over 110 firebombings of tobacconist shops, three public execution-style shootings, three stabbings of young people purchasing vapes, and rampant extortion – all symptoms of a failing policy.

Australia's fierce opposition to vaping mirrors its historical resistance to harm reduction initiatives for other psychoactive drugs. Once a global leader in harm reduction, Australia has now become an international outlier, its quasi-prohibition of vaping undermining its broader drug harm reduction efforts. To rectify this, Australia should aim to become smoke-free as soon as possible, while actively encouraging smokers to switch to one of the four reduced-risk nicotine options.

Reducing smoking among adults must take precedence over curbing experimental youth vaping. Unfortunately, the government has formulated its current tobacco control policy without consulting people who smoke or vape, disregarding the principle of 'nothing about us without us.' Effective harm reduction requires a commitment to scientific evidence and the protection of human rights. Yet, Australian authorities have repeatedly misrepresented or ignored scientific findings while undermining smokers' rights to improve their health by switching to lower-risk nicotine options.

Like other drug users, most smokers will transition to safer alternatives if these are accessible, affordable, and appealing. Some tobacco companies are also pivoting towards these lower-risk products, with investors showing a preference for companies that transition more rapidly. In Australia, vaping should be treated as an adult consumer product, available from licensed, age-restricted premises, and easier to purchase than deadly cigarettes.

Harm Reduction Australia is increasing its emphasis on tobacco harm reduction and looks forward to other Australian harm reduction and drug law reform organisations also increasing their support for this important issue.



**Dr Alex Wodak AM**



**Dr James Martin SFHEA**

**Tobacco Harm Reduction Advisors  
Harm Reduction Australia**

**For further comment contact:** Annie Madden, Executive Director, Harm Reduction Australia on 0414-628-136



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