E-cigarettes – ICMR Calls For Ban

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recently recommended a complete ban on e-cigarettes and other electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS). The ICMR based its recommendation on currently available scientific evidence according to which e-cigarettes not only contain nicotine, but also other harmful ingredients such as flavouring agents and vaporizers.

Some time back, experts at the World Health Organization had also called for a ban on the use of e-cigarettes and cautioned against their being sold to adolescents in fruit, candy or alcoholic-drink style flavours. In the UK, the British Medical Association and Faculty of Public Health have also sounded notes of caution.

E-cigarettes involve heating a liquid to produce an aerosol. The liquid usually contains nicotine, flavourings, and other chemicals that help to make the aerosol. The chemicals also include propylene glycol (PEG), which gets vaporized by the heater giving out theatrical smoke. The liquid containing chemicals is also called “e-juice,” “e-liquid,” “vape juice,” or “vape liquid.” Users inhale the e-cigarette aerosol into their lungs. Sometimes e-cigarette devices are also used to deliver marijuana and other drugs.

The nicotine in e-cigarettes is an addictive drug that is known to harm the developing adolescent brain. The ICMR paper noted that there is documented evidence about the harm from use of e-cigarettes, which includes “DNA damage; carcinogenic, cellular, molecular and immunological toxicity; respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological disorders; and adverse impact on fetal development and pregnancy.”

Attractive flavourings are often added to the e-cigarettes to make them more alluring for the young. Some flavourings may be safe to eat but not to inhale because the gut can process more substances than the lungs. Children and adults have been poisoned by swallowing, breathing, or absorbing e-cigarette liquid through their skin or eyes. Besides, defective e-cigarette batteries have caused fires and explosions.

Contrary to arguments of e-cigarette manufacturers and promoters that e-cigarettes could help smokers quit tobacco consumption, experts of the Public Health Foundation of India who analysed over 300 research articles from across the world and prepared the white paper, believe that it could in fact end up with the young using the e-cigarette as well as tobacco products. “Use of ENDS or e-cigarettes can open a gateway for new tobacco addiction,” they say. In fact, a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine also says that e-cigarettes could prime the brain to be more receptive to harder drugs.

The committee that included experts from ICMR, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and Food Safety and Standards Authority of India noted that with more than 460 different brands with over 7,700 flavours, millions of youngsters around the world had taken to e-cigarettes. The scale is worrying and the danger real that e-cigarettes could push adolescents towards other harder drugs. And therefore this calls for strict regulation of advertising and marketing of e-cigarettes as also access to the youth.

Hasan Jawaid Khan