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Banning e-cigarettes could harm public health: CHRA

Jammu: Council for Harm Reduced Alternatives (CHRA), a national tobacco harm reduction organisation that works towards reducing the tobacco health burden through safer alternatives, and Association of Vapers India (AVI), an advocacy group that represents e-cigarette users across the country, have warned central and states governments against the consequences of banning e-cigarettes, saying it would deprive millions of smokers of safer choices and cause damage to public health.

CHRA said it is unfortunate the government is mulling banning e-cigarettes, which are 95% less harmful compared to tobacco cigarettes, even as it promotes harm reduction programmes in interventions on addiction and communicable diseases. Toxic chemicals and tar produced from the burning of cigarettes are the main culprits for tobacco-related deaths across the world, not the nicotine. E-cigarettes have nicotine but not the tar as there is no combustion, pointed out the vapers' body. Banning e-cigarettes would deny the country's 120 million smokers a lower-risk means of nicotine intake and cessation, stated AVI.

"Harm reduction is a concept we apply in our everyday lives by opting for safer products, be it refined oil or less-polluting cars. In tobacco use too, the lives of users can be positively impacted with harm-reduced alternatives. The government has so far relied on an emotional appeal to persuade tobacco users to kick the habit, but never offered an alternative beyond gums and patches, which have a very low success rate. An attempt to ban e-cigarettes is regressive given that the government's stated policy is to provide wider choices to consumers for all products and services, and not restrict them, said Samrat Chowdhery, Director, CHRA.

Pratik Gupta, Director, AVI, said: "The idea of banning e-cigarettes is premature given that no studies have been conducted by our health bodies on the health impact of vaping. Meanwhile, multiple peer-reviewed scientific studies in countries such as the UK and elsewhere have convinced health experts and governments to encourage smokers to switch to vaping. The hurry to ban e-cigarettes is therefore not understandable." E-cigarettes are not only less harmful compared to tobacco cigarettes but also help smokers wean off the nicotine dependence. Besides, vaping poses far lower risk to bystanders than passive smoking. Regulatory permission for the use of e-cigarettes in developed countries like the US, EU and the UK has yielded positive results, with smoking rates falling in these countries in recent years. In contrast, smoking prevalence in India remains stubbornly high and more needs to be done beyond banking on the willpower of smokers to quit, as failure rates are as high as 95%. Further, increasing taxes beyond a point is counter-productive as it forces users to switch to cheaper, more harmful variants.

"We request the government and health authorities to seriously consider the role of tobacco harm reduction in combating the tobacco epidemic which is killing a million people in our country every year," Chowdhery said, adding that lower-risk alternatives are also available for smokeless tobacco in the form of Swedish snus, which like e-cigarettes, has been found to reduce harm by over 95%. "This would require a shift from the current moralistic approach of 'quit or die' to a more pragmatic one," he added. Gupta countered the allegations of vaping leading to teen use by saying, "Most of the vapers in India, as it is worldwide, are ex-smokers. We strongly oppose use by underage and non-smokers and would welcome all steps in this direction." Today, we have met Hon'ble Minister of Health & Family Welfare (state) Ms. Anupriya Patel and submitted a 4000 pages case studies to her which states that e-cigarette are less harmful product and is the best way to quit smoking. Minster has confirmed us that she will examine all the reports. The government can regulate the sale of e-cigarettes under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Product Act to prevent teens from using them, the AVI director added.