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UNDER A CLOUD

Last week, more than 1 million signatures were submitted to election officials to pave the way for a state proposition that might overturn a ban on flavored tobacco products. It's just the latest battle in a war over tobacco and tobacco products. Below, a medical expert, three advocates of reducing tobacco consumption and a graduate student share their views.

RAPID RISE IN E-CIGARETTE USE MIRRORS THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

BY JEANNIE HUANG

2020 has been a devastating year, with the world ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic in multiple arenas from health to economics to social interactions and engagement. As a pediatric subspecialist evaluating children at Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego, I am struck by the enormity of the impact of COVID-19 in the world of those I care for. For those whose family members have died or suffered significant health decline from COVID-19, the consequences of the pandemic have been catastrophic. For those whose caregivers have lost their jobs and livelihood, the impact has been similarly devastating. For those fortunate to have avoided these prior two outcomes, social distancing has wreaked havoc on education, team sports and events, family gatherings, play dates, etc.

Of course, my main concern as a pediatric health professional is the health and well-being of children and adolescents, and from that perspective, perhaps we are lucky in that most of our youth have been personally spared the morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19 infection. Nevertheless, there are notable risk factors that can change that dynamic. One prominent risk factor for worse health outcomes is youth engaging in smoking and/or vaping. Both behaviors weaken the body's natural defenses against COVID-19 through a number of different mechanisms and by affecting a number of different systems, including the pulmonary system (lungs) and the immune system.

The rapid rise in the use of e-cigarettes has very much been borne of the same cloth as that of the opioid epidemic — through promotion of the “safety” of the product in question. In the case of prescription opioids, physician prescribers were led to believe that these prescription medications were not addictive, when, in fact, quite the opposite was true. Initially created to help smokers quit smoking and to provide a “safer” alternative to smoking owing to reduced exposure to many toxic carcinogens, e-cigarettes have been advertised as a “safer” alternative to smoking. While initial data may have suggested increased smoking quit rates among those using e-cigarettes, more recent data suggests no differences in rates of quitting among those using e-cigarettes as compared to those who do not, and, more concerning, an increased likelihood to not only continue smoking but also to add a new “addiction” to vaping such that users now both smoke *and* vape. Beginning in summer 2019 — with the recognition of E-cigarette or Vaping use-Associated Lung Injury (EVALI) among adolescents and young adults in particular, now understood to be the consequences of lung exposure

to substances in vaping fluid, and the recognition that signs of lung damage are more prevalent among e-cigarette users than initially believed — one has to question whether the path forward and suffered by initial prescription opioid users (one of addiction and misuse) will be a future suffered by vaping users when the full long-term consequences of vaping are analyzed.

While e-cigarettes are not meant to be used by youth, marketing campaigns promoting candy-like flavors and colorful devices have nonetheless attracted youth to vape. In recognition of increasing vaping behaviors among youth, since December 2019, we have been collecting data on vaping behaviors among adolescents at Rady Children's. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we screened 4,422 adolescents, and since it began, we have screened 10,749 adolescents. Prevalence of vaping as reported by our adolescent patients was 2.7 percent prior to COVID-19. Since the arrival of COVID-19, the prevalence of vaping has been 1.8 percent — a decrease of 33 percent.

While the absolute percentage reduction is small, the reduction in vaping behaviors appears to be real. Potential contributors include the cost of vaping, which can be significant in the setting of the pandemic-induced economic crisis, receipt of public health messaging regarding the increased risk for worse COVID-19 outcomes if one smokes or vapes, and the widespread prevalence of quit services. Further, with the rapid rise in EVALI cases only six months prior to the first COVID-19 case reported in the United States (Jan. 21, 2020), numerous public health advisories at multiple levels (national, state and local) began anti-vaping campaigns in the hopes of stemming predictions of future notable numbers of youth contracting EVALI with its adverse long-term consequences.

I am happy to see this small but significant downward trend in vaping behaviors among our youth. And I remain hopeful that the negative effects of COVID-19 on vaping will remain and persist beyond the pandemic. As a new dawn emerges with the promise of an effective COVID-19 vaccine on the horizon and an expected “return to life,” I hope that we do not similarly see a new awakening in vaping behaviors.

If anything, COVID-19 has reminded us that there is much in life to live for outside of the experience offered in an atomizer, a pod and the vaping cloud that ultimately dissipates with significant leftover hazards that just aren't worth it. They never were, but frankly, now, that's even more so.

Huang is a pediatric gastroenterologist and member of the Vaping Task Force at Rady Children's Hospital. She lives in Carmel Valley.

RESTRICT FLAVORED TOBACCO PRODUCTS

BY LYNDA BARBOUR, STACY WEAVER & JUDI STRANG

Easy access to kid-friendly flavored tobacco is driving today's youth tobacco and vaping epidemic. Fruit, mint and candy flavors mask the harsh taste of tobacco, making these products highly alluring to kids.

In recent years, e-cigarette use has skyrocketed among middle school and high school students. But e-cigarettes aren't the only tobacco products that kids are using in high numbers: Menthol cigarettes, cigars, smokeless tobacco and hookahs have all become more popular among kids because they, too, come in sweet flavors. Today, over 30 percent of high school students report using tobacco, putting these teens at risk for a lifetime of nicotine addiction and health problems, including cardiovascular diseases and cancers.

Local policies that protect kids are critical to preventing youth nicotine addiction and tobacco-related death and disease. The evidence is clear: Across all tobacco products, flavors are overwhelmingly used by youth as starter products. Eighty-one percent of kids who have ever used tobacco started with a flavor. Ninety-seven percent of kids who regularly smoke e-cigarettes (vapes) use flavors.

Big Tobacco shamelessly uses this knowledge to entice kids into nicotine addiction by marketing their products in kid-friendly flavors. In fact, flavored tobacco products have long been a tool used by the industry to lure new and young customers. Today's tobacco products come in over 15,000 flavors like gummy bear, cotton candy, mint, menthol and mango. With their colorful packaging and sweet, candy flavors, these products are often hard to distinguish from candy displays in local stores.

Many ask, what can be done to counter predatory marketing practices and sky-high youth tobacco use rates?

In the San Diego region, community organizations have worked together to support these policies and protect kids. Earlier this year, the San Dieguito Alliance worked with parents and students in Solana Beach to advocate for ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products. This policy, combined with the tobacco retail license already in place, provides important protections. Solana Beach is not alone. Community volunteers also worked with Imperial Beach to support a policy to end the sale of all flavored tobacco products.

Communities across California and the country are ending the sale of flavored tobacco products and licensing tobacco retailers. This ensures stores aren't selling tobacco to people under the age of 21 and removes the appeal of flavored tobacco products. These local policies are key to reducing youth tobacco access and stemming this public health crisis.

Under the leadership of Supervisors Dianne Jacob and Nathan Fletcher, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors recently took a big step forward in protecting our kids from nicotine addiction by voting to end the sale of some flavored tobacco products and license tobacco retailers.

Yet the policy creates a problematic loophole by allowing flavored hookahs, flavored premium cigars and flavored pipe tobacco to remain on local shelves. Even a small percentage of youth who use these products deserve the same protection against the industry's blatant targeting.

In addition, exempting certain flavored products in this way will allow Big Tobacco to continue addicting our kids. After Congress prohibited all flavored cigarettes except menthol cigarettes in the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, the industry increased marketing of flavored cigars and e-cigarettes, and youth use of these products increased.

Strong local policies like these are especially important given the developments surrounding state-level protections. Over the summer, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 793 — legislation that restricts the sale of flavored tobacco products in California. But within days, the tobacco industry launched a referendum to overturn this lifesaving law.

This is a clear attempt to delay implementation and protect the industry's revenue, allowing it to continue to addict our kids. According to calculations made by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, if implementation of the California flavor law is delayed by two years, allowing tobacco flavors like grape, mint, menthol and gummy bear to continue to be sold, there will be approximately 37,000 more high school e-cigarette users.

The American Heart Association and American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network are committed to reducing youth tobacco addiction by supporting our communities in ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products and the licensing of tobacco retailers. We look forward to working with local city officials and the incoming county Board of Supervisors to reduce the youth tobacco epidemic fueled by candy-flavored products.

Together, we can save thousands of lives by reducing the devastating health impact of tobacco addiction. It starts by protecting our youth.

Barbour is the Southern California government relations director with the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. She lives in La Mesa. **Weaver** is the executive director of the American Heart Association San Diego Division. She lives in Oceanside. **Strang** is the executive director of the San Dieguito Alliance. She lives in San Dieguito.



A man exhales while smoking an e-cigarette. “Electric vaporizers” have been created for nearly a century, but the modern form of vaping was invented by Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik in 2003.

I WILL DEFEND FREEDOMS TO USE CIGARETTES OR TOBACCO

BY JESS NUÑEZ

The once-glorified cigarette graced the silver screen and could be seen in almost every magazine. Lucky Strike advertisements were as American as apple pie. Joe Camel was a four-legged hero and probably more popular than Spuds MacKenzie. Who didn't want to look as cool as James Dean with a cigarette between their lips? On the battlefield, a cigarette provided tranquility even if just for a moment. Taking a few drags in a foxhole on a French battlefield while German soldiers were heard yelling or reloading was a little reminder of home.

For decades, cigarettes were a normal part of life. People smoked in every setting — parties, at the office, on airplanes or in the kitchen after a long day. Then we started learning about the negative health implications. Americans became aware smoking cigarettes can have long-term negative effects on our bodies. We learned about nicotine and its addictiveness. Cancer was then linked to tobacco use. Long-term cigarette or cigar smoking could cause lung cancer. As people became aware, folks changed their behavior. Tobacco use, natu-

rally, started to decline.

Then along came the government. Both federal and state governments started to demonize tobacco companies and tobacco use. An all-out war began. The power and deep pockets of government would be no match. For decades, ad campaigns targeted tobacco companies. Government enacted laws restricting advertisements. Tobacco packaging was regulated. Then came the taxes. Cigarettes are one of the highest taxed products available. When this didn't satisfy the thirst for power, bureaucrats started telling us about secondhand smoke. See, it's not just bad for you, it's also harmful to those around you. (There is not scientific consensus about the degree.) Again, not satisfied, they claimed thirdhand smoke is not just a reality but dangerous as well. (That claim is still the subject of research.)

Years later major tobacco companies would be sued. They settled every state lawsuit pending against the tobacco industry for an astounding \$206 billion! We are told they target young people. They want people to use their products. Umm, yes, of course they do! The same things were said about McDonald's. Happy Meals target

young kids. Again, yes, of course they do!

That is the goal of every business. Provide a service or product people want or need. Then separate people from their money.

Eventually people figured out smoking is not a good choice or were shamed into quitting. Notice I used the word choice? The consumer then found a new way. It is said necessity is the mother of all invention and smoking was no exception. The need for a safer alternative gave us vaping. Vaping produces no smoke. The cloud you see is water vapor. Vaping allows the user to regulate the amount of nicotine they inhale. In fact, people have used vaping to quit smoking altogether. Users gradually reduce the amount of nicotine, slowly breaking their addiction. Manufacturers of vaping products got creative and started selling flavored vape, opening a new market. Flavored vape attracted people who didn't smoke cigarettes at all. This included young adults and teenagers. And right on cue, government comes to the rescue once again. Realizing existing laws weren't keeping tobacco products out of the mouths of teenagers, the smoking age was raised from 18 to 21.

That wasn't enough either. Gov. Gavin

Newsom recently signed into law Senate Bill 793, which bans the sale of flavored tobacco products, beginning in January. Luckily, more than 1 million signatures were submitted to election officials last week to pave the way for a ballot measure to overturn that ban.

Meanwhile, the state government is pushing cannabis use! That's right, the same people who have been telling us not to smoke cigarettes are making it easier to smoke cannabis. In fact, cannabis dispensaries were deemed essential businesses during the pandemic.

I'm not defending cigarettes or tobacco use. I am defending the individual freedom to do so. I am fed up with the demonization of tobacco users and manufacturers. The last thing left to do is ban nicotine. But that hasn't happened yet. Why?

The next time you see someone taking a drag, don't look at them with disgust. Save your judgment and instead thank them because their cigarette taxes fund child health care.

Nuñez is a graduate student in education. He lives in El Centro.