

A Qualitative Exploration of Tobacco Retailers' Suitability to sell Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) Amid Legislative Change in New Zealand

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Background

In 2017, the New Zealand Government signalled their intent to permit the sale of ENDS, allow ENDS point-of-sale promotions, and allow R18 outlets to advertise ENDS on store exterior, offer discounts, free samples and product testing.

This action provided a unique opportunity to examine tobacco retailers' response to these proposed changes in order to assess their likely suitability as ENDS retailers.



Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 owners/managers of a range of tobacco retail outlets in Otago and Wellington prior to the legislative change.

We explored participants' knowledge of ENDS products, their perceptions of the benefits and risks of ENDS relative to tobacco, their capacity and willingness to support ENDS users to quit smoking, their attitudes towards selling ENDS and tobacco, their knowledge of current legislation for selling ENDS, and their views on of proposed legislation for selling ENDS.

Results

Tobacco retailers generally had poor **knowledge of ENDS products** and how to use them, and either offered inappropriate advice, or were unable or unwilling to offer any information or advice, to customers:

"I will take their money, and that's it. But I am...I most certainly ain't gonna stand there and say, "Well, look, you know, do you know how to use them, and if so...or if not, this is how." I mean, if they're big enough to buy them, and old enough to buy them, they surely should be able to read the instructions" (P4).

In terms of the **benefits and risks of ENDS relative to tobacco**, most tobacco retailers considered reduced cost and fewer restrictions placed on where, when, and for how long ENDS can be used, rather than positive health implications, as the main benefits of ENDS relative to tobacco. They commonly perceived ENDS to be as harmful, if not more harmful, than tobacco, and often mistook ENDS safety and harm relative to tobacco as being correlated with the level of nicotine in each product. In some instances, this perception appeared to be propagated by the tobacco industry:

"As the [tobacco] company says, they've got the same nicotine. So, same nicotine, same harm" (P1).

In terms of their **capacity and willingness to support ENDS users to quit smoking**, many tobacco retailers stated that they were happy to stock ENDS as an alternative, but said they were unlikely to promote ENDS as an alternative to tobacco. Reasons given for this stance included their lack of specialist knowledge; their perception that ENDS are not effective smoking cessation tools; concerns that ENDS simply replace one addiction with another; and respect for the personal choice of the customer:

"The choice is theirs...Yeah. Yeah. I'd tell them that we have the cigarettes. I'd tell them what we had. If they ask for vaping, I'd tell them what we had, and then, you know, the choice is theirs. I'm not there to make their own, to make their choice for them" (P17).

Tobacco retailers **attitudes towards selling ENDS** were largely driven by demand, rather than any moral or social principles. Those that already sold ENDS all noted that they made up a very small proportion of their overall business. One major theme to emerge was that retailers felt there was no incentive to sell ENDS rather than tobacco, because tobacco is incentivised through rebates, high turnover, repeat custom and ancillary sales, whereas ENDS are not:

"It's a small shop, so we want our customers to be repeat every time, to come again and buy the smokes and buy some other stuff. So if the customers buy the e-cigarettes, ones like the long-lasting, it's very hard to get the customers back to the shop...I want the customer to come every day. At least four or five times a week so that, you know, you can buy some other things. For e-cigarettes, if they're going to buy one e-cigarette from my shop, the next time definitely after two or three weeks you need to come... And second thing is that we sign a contract with the [tobacco] companies and the companies are giving us some sort of rebates and so for e-cigarettes we're not getting any rebates" (P13).

Tobacco retailers had limited **knowledge of current legislation for selling ENDS** in New Zealand. Once informed of the current and **proposed legislation**, most retailers agreed that it should be legal to sell ENDS, and most felt that existing tobacco retailers, including themselves, were appropriate ENDS retailers. Some also felt that more research exploring the long term health impacts of ENDS was needed before making them legal. The majority of tobacco retailers interviewed also felt that the sale of ENDS should be restricted to people over the age of 18, but many had difficulty reconciling more liberal promotion of ENDS within the tightening tobacco control framework:

"Um, the only thing I probably would question would be the promotional side of it...So what are the limits on the promotion of the product? Is it just point of sale? I still think that's a bit unusual. I probably don't agree with that because it's still, it's a product that still has nicotine in it and it is still promoting the act of smoking whether it be with or without nicotine" (P8).

Conclusion

Allowing any type of outlet to stock ENDS alongside tobacco may not be in the customers best interests. Concurrent research indicates that smokers who wish to use ENDS to quit require detailed information, something which tobacco retailers are currently unable and/or unwilling to provide. Retailers will continue to prioritise tobacco over ENDS because it is incentivised through rebates and repeat custom, whereas ENDS is not. Restricting ENDS sales to specialist outlets and/or pharmacies might be the best way to support smoking cessation.