


Hunt bows to MP pressure to reverse vaping ban

By **SIAN POWELL**, SCIENCE WRITER

12:00AM SEPTEMBER 20, 2018 •  34 COMMENTS

Liberal MPs have forced Health Minister Greg Hunt to commission research on the potential health benefits of e-cigarettes, just six months after a parliamentary inquiry opposed their legalisation.

It is understood an “overwhelming majority” of Liberal parliamentarians now support legalising vaping and e-cigarettes as a way of helping cigarette smokers quit. Even though Mr Hunt had earlier declared legalisation would not happen — “not on my watch” — he has agreed to the compromise position of further research. “The government will commission independent research in this area, possibly through the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University,” a spokeswoman for the minister said yesterday.

“This research would complement the existing research by bodies such as the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) and NDARC (National Drug Alcohol Research Centre).

“We will continue to follow the advice of the medical authorities.”

Mr Hunt’s spokeswoman said the Therapeutic Goods Administration opposed the introduction of e-cigarettes, along with Australia’s Chief Medical Officer, chief health officers from states and territories, the Australian Medical Association and NHMRC.

Liberal senator James Paterson proposed the compromise. “A genuinely independent look at the science behind the health benefits of switching from smoking to vaping is a sensible path forward,” he said. “My hope is for bipartisan action to give smokers a safer alternative.”

Fellow Liberal MP Tim Wilson said he believed Australians should be free to choose to vape or use e-cigarettes to help quit smoking. “After doing an inquiry into the health

consequences of vaping, I can't in good conscience do anything other than support the accessibility of vaporisers for people addicted to nicotine," he said.

Mr Hunt's back-down follows a vote by the West Australian Liberal Party last month that recommended supporting e-cigarettes as a way to quit smoking.

New Zealand's effective legalisation of e-cigarettes this year followed a paper published in the Internal Medical Journal of the Royal Australian College of Physicians supporting e-cigarettes.

Colin Mendelsohn, the tobacco treatment expert at the University of NSW and e-cigarettes advocate, who wrote the paper, said the US and Britain permitted the legal use of e-cigarettes and vaping, and legalisation could also happen in Australia.

"I think the momentum is really starting to shift," Associate Professor Mendelsohn added, saying support for "harm minimisation" was gaining traction.

"Obviously the best thing for lungs is fresh air. But you have to compare vaping to smoking, and the risk from vaping compared to smoking is tiny. No one is saying it's risk-free. It's harm reduction. It's not harm elimination."

The Labor Party has not changed its opposition to e-cigarettes, health spokeswoman Catherine King said. "Minister Hunt said the ban on e-cigarettes would never be overturned on his watch," she said. "So why is he suddenly ordering another review?"

"Is he caving into his restive backbench, to quell more Liberal division and dysfunction? Or is he caving into big tobacco, the loudest advocates for e-cigarettes who stand to profit from their legalisation?"

She said the Labor Party would continue to monitor and consider emerging evidence on e-cigarettes, but in the meantime would follow the advice of the TGA.

SIAN POWELL, HIGHER EDUCATION & SCIENCE WRITER

Sian Powell was The Australian's Jakarta correspondent between 2003 and 2006. She returned to The Australian after living in Thailand and Hong Kong for several years, where she wrote extensively for international... [Read more](#)