

E-cigs lesser evil

THE NT Government released its five-year Tobacco Action Plan earlier this month.

In the clearest demonstration yet that the Government has lost its way, the document not only doesn't mention safer alternative products such as e-cigarettes, it doubles down on the same tactics that have failed to reduce the Territory's smoking rates – the highest in the country.

The forward, penned by Minister for Health Natasha Fyles, acknowledges the widely accepted harm caused by tobacco smoking to both smokers and the people around them.

However, for those adults already smoking, or who have tried and failed to quit, the Territory Government's message is simple – quit or die.

But there is another option. Recent research has found that e-cigarettes (personal vaporisers) are twice as effective as nicotine patches and gums in helping smokers to quit.

Vaping is not risk-free, but it is a far less harmful alternative to smoking.

According to the UK Royal College of Physicians, long-term use is likely to be at least 95 per cent less harmful than smoking cigarettes.

This is because vaping products do not contain tobacco or produce smoke and it is the thousands of toxic chemicals and carcinogens in smoke from burning tobacco that cause almost all of the death and disease from smoking.

These products are erroneously classified as tobacco under the Territory's recent tobacco control legislation in a deliberate, ideologically driven attempt to conflate legally



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available, deadly cigarettes with – absurdly – a much less harmful but illegal alternative.

In stark contrast, a short flight away in New Zealand, the Ministry of Health has launched a new website this week encouraging smokers to switch to vaping.

The new Vaping Facts website provides accurate infor-

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To be clear, vaping is not harmless, and those who don't smoke shouldn't vape.

But for smokers who cannot quit – and there are many – switching to vaping provides a similar hand-to-mouth experi-

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mation on vaping and encourages smokers who cannot otherwise quit to switch to vaping, a much safer alternative. The campaign will be accompanied by TV and online media coverage later this year.

The Vaping Facts campaign has a special focus on Maori smokers, especially women, who have very high smoking rates and have responded especially well to vaping.

This is especially relevant in the Territory, where – according to the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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ence with dramatically reduced health risks. My interest in stamping out smoking is stronger than most; my father died from kidney cancer linked to smoking and my wife's dad died from smoking-related lung cancer when she was 12. In nearly 30 years as a GP, I have worked with countless patients to help them quit, and I have spent over two decades training other GPs to help their patients quit.

As a tobacco treatment specialist, I help long-term smokers who've tried every-

thing else but just haven't been able to quit. For many, their only remaining legal option is to keep smoking.

Conventional treatments to quit smoking have very modest success rates and most Australian smokers try and fail repeatedly to quit.

Smokers and their families deserve to know there are much less harmful alternatives which have helped millions of smokers to break the lethal addiction. Vaping is now the most popular quitting aid in most countries where it is available.

We were once a world leader in tobacco control, but Australian smoking rates have stagnated since 2013 while they continue to fall in places like the United Kingdom, United States and across the European Union, where smokers have access to vaping and other smoke-free products.

Ignoring harm reduction options like vaping leaves some of the most vulnerable Australians with no other option than to keep smoking, particularly indigenous Australians, people living with mental illness or substance use, and low-income smokers.

The NT Government needs to look across the ditch: put the ideology aside, look at the evidence and tell the truth about safer nicotine products. The lives of two in three Territorian smokers depend on it.

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