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Tragic death of child highlights urgent need for liquid nicotine regulation: ATHRA

The significant failure of Australia's increasingly backward approach to the regulation of vaping products was today highlighted following the release of a Victorian Coroner's report into the tragic death of an 18-month-old child.

The Coroner found that the child died in June 2018 after ingesting a highly concentrated form of liquid nicotine, which is commonly imported from overseas.

Conjoint Associate Professor Colin Mendelsohn, Chairman of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA) said the case demonstrates the urgent need for the legalisation and regulation of liquid vaping products in Australia.

"This tragedy could have been avoided if Australia had a proper regulatory system in place that imposed strict standards on product packaging and liquid nicotine concentrations," Prof Mendelsohn said.

"The Coroner said in his report 'if the product is banned in Australia, how can we in this country enforce safeguards... of a product manufactured overseas?'.

"Unfortunately, he stopped short of recommending legislation and regulation, instead proposing a public awareness campaign about liquid nicotine. This is disappointing, because a public awareness campaign is unlikely to have prevented a tragedy like this. The only thing that will prevent this from happening again is proper regulation."

Because of the ban on nicotine e-liquid and lack of regulation, Australian vapers are unable to legally purchase safer pre-mixed, ready-to-vape nicotine liquids locally.

Many users instead import a highly concentrated form of nicotine liquid to mix their own. These solutions are much cheaper and require smaller volumes of liquid to be imported. However, they are much more toxic and are unregulated.

Although unintentional, the flaws in Australia's regulations have now resulted in tragedy.

The Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA) recommends that pre-mixed, ready-to-vape nicotine e-liquid in low concentrations (up to 24mg/ml) be made legally available for sale in Australia. These safer nicotine preparations would be sold only in child-proof bottles with appropriate labelling.

This would eliminate the need to import dangerous, highly concentrated nicotine liquid in unsafe bottles. There would be no need for home mixing which involves risks from accidental

overdose, spillage and mixing errors. Strict rules around bottling, labelling, safety warnings and child-proof containers should also be enforced for additional protection.

“The tragic death of this 18-month-old child was due to a combination of human error as well as flawed legislation. Legalising and regulating low concentrations of pre-mixed nicotine e-liquid would support smokers who wish to switch to vaping and reduce the risk of further episodes of child poisoning,” Prof Mendelsohn concluded.

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What is ATHRA?

Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA) is a registered health promotion charity established to reduce the harm from tobacco smoking in Australia. ATHRA aims to raise awareness of less harmful alternatives for adult smokers who are otherwise unable to quit. ATHRA’s broader goal is to encourage the complete cessation of tobacco smoking in Australia. For more information, visit www.athra.org.au.

ATHRA is funded by unconditional donations from the general public. It does not accept donations from tobacco companies or their subsidiaries or the vaping industry.

None of the directors has ever had any financial or commercial relationship with any electronic cigarette or tobacco company.

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ATHRA is registered as a charity with the
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