

Black market marijuana 'the culprit behind vaping deaths'



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A BUNDABERG businessman and an expert on the dangers of tobacco have spoken up in support of vaping following two deaths in the US where people died from serious lung conditions.

Vaping is the practice of using an electronic cigarette to mimic the action of smoking but with vapour rather than smoke.

But iVape Australia owner Shane Kerrigan and University of New South Wales Conjoint Associate Professor Colin Mendelsohn say information around deaths from vaping has been entirely misconstrued.

The New York Times reported more than 200 people in the US had developed serious conditions linked to vaping, in addition to two recent deaths, but both Mr Kerrigan and Prof Mendelsohn explained it's not the action of vaping that's fatal, but the illicit contents some users are inhaling.

"Reporting on this issue has been very misleading and has conflated 'vaping nicotine to quit smoking' with 'using a vaporiser to administer other drugs'," Prof Mendelsohn said.

The professor said vaping had been popular for the past 10 years with no link to respiratory harm, a claim he said was backed by recent studies.

"Suddenly there is an outbreak of clusters of serious lung disease in the US but no other country," he said. "In every case so far where the product has been identified, the culprit was THC - cannabis oil - purchased on the black market."

It's the toxins and solvents in these black market oils that are killing users, he says.

Injuries in the US had occurred in states or counties where recreational cannabis was banned.

"This confirms that bans don't protect people - they only force them into the black market, which has no oversight and no precautions against tainted products," he said.

Mr Kerrigan agreed there was a problem in the US with marijuana and vaping mixing on the black market.

People are vaping a concoction Mr Kerrigan labels "black market marijuana juice" which he says can contain butane.

Another product being used is a synthetic marijuana called Spice.

Prof Mendelsohn, who is the foundation chair of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association - a charity set up to help smokers quit - says normal vaping using legitimate products is still an effective option for people who can't or won't stop smoking.

"It's delivering the nicotine they're addicted to, but without the smoke which kills them," he said.

Mr Kerrigan, who has been vaping instead of smoking for eight years, said he'd noticed a 20 per cent downturn in business since news broke of the deaths in the US, and said some Bundaberg vapers had even returned to conventional cigarettes.

"(Vaping) is the best way forward for smokers," Mr Kerrigan said.

"It's giving people their lives back."

Mr Kerrigan said he believed there was widespread misinformation on vaping, levelling blame at the government for failing to develop regulations for vaping in Australia while receiving millions in tax revenue from tobacco products.

Mr Kerrigan said the "ma and pa" vape shops in Australia were left to self-govern, modelling themselves on countries such as the UK and New Zealand where regulations exist.

He argues that nicotine is misunderstood.

"Past the age of 21 nicotine is more good for you than bad," Mr Kerrigan says.

It's cigarettes, he says, that are taking lives.

"The only thing that's more evil than cigarettes is the people who sell them," he said.

Prof Mendelsohn said he stood by advice issued by Public Health England on the outbreak on lung conditions related to vaping - that e-cigarettes come with a fraction of the risks involved with smoking and that smokers should switch to vaping completely and only use regulated liquids.

Queensland Health, however, does not support vaping.

The government warns vaping liquids can contain the same chemicals and toxins as traditional cigarettes.

The government warns that nicotine can lead to impaired brain development in young people and classify it as a dangerous poison.

Just one teaspoonful of commercially available liquid nicotine can cause irreversible damage or death to a child, according to Queensland Health.

The government states more than 200 incidents have been recorded in the UK where people were injured by exploding or igniting batteries in vaping devices.

"E-cigarettes are not harmless, if you've never smoked before, don't start," the government's website warns. For support phone the Quitline on 137 848.