

E-cigarettes threaten public health advances

By LINDA WITUCKI

Good news went quietly unnoticed as the Wisconsin Department of Health Services announced earlier this month that state cigarette smoking rates are at a historic low of 17%, but officials say it's too early to declare victory on the war against tobacco.

One key concern was highlighted in the Oct. 21 Journal Sentinel Watchdog Report, "Inhaling dangerous chemicals," which raises the alarm about the growth and safety of other tobacco and nicotine products, particularly e-cigarettes.

The fledgling e-cigarette industry has from the get-go alleged without proof that its products are safer than cigarettes, setting the bar about as low as you can go without tripping over it. However, the Journal Sentinel findings correctly question the credibility of even that minimal claim.

The lungs are the most vulnerable organs in the human body, not fully developing until around age 12 and declining naturally with age. While they are capable of miraculous self-repair from many environmental and behavioral assaults, the Watchdog Report makes it clear that inhaling two of the more common chemicals found in flavorings added to vaping products — diacetyl and 2,3 pentanedione — can cause permanent, irreparable lung damage and even death.

So why add the flavorings at all? As the tobacco industry has known for decades, flavors sell the product and create the market, especially when it comes to youths. While 55% of students ages 18 and older who smoke also report using e-cigarettes, an astonishing and troubling 15% of nonsmokers also have tried them. Equally alarming, a recent study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that ninth-graders who said they had used e-cigarettes were four times more likely to report both six months and one year later that they had gone on to experiment with traditional tobacco products, compared with their classmates who had never used them.

Enticed by candy and fruit flavorings, as well

as the industry's messaging that e-cigarette use is "safe," these products have found their way into the hearts, mouths and backpacks of middle and high school students everywhere. Their colorful flavorings, packings and designs also serve to fool unsuspecting adults into thinking they are either candy or pens.

While recognized by the federal government as tobacco products, the Food and Drug Administration has been promising for years to advance rules that would seek to protect the public health and our youths but those rules have yet to be released. In the meantime, almost all states have enacted their own policies limiting e-cigarette use, including seven states (Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon and Utah) that prohibit their use wherever cigarette smoking is prohibited and at least two more (Oklahoma and Oregon) that restrict their use on state-owned property.

When it comes to smoke-free air, the question is not whether secondhand e-cigarette emissions are safer than secondhand smoke from cigarettes, but rather, are those emissions safer than clean air? The answer is unequivocally no. Wisconsin has enjoyed more than five years of clean indoor air, thanks to its smoke-free air law. Increased use of e-cigarettes, as well as the rising popularity of "cloud chasing" (the practice of creating large cloud puffs of aerosol) threatens the public health advances created through these laws.

This report clearly shows the consequences of unregulated tobacco products in the marketplace. When reputable, non-biased scientists, unaffiliated with either industry or public health, such as those in the Marquette University chemistry department, find dangerous levels of lung damaging-destroying substances in e-cigarettes, it's time to move forward with policies that protect public health.

Linda Witucki is the executive director of the American Lung Association in Wisconsin. Learn more about e-cigarettes and lung health at Lung.org/ecigs.