

LCQ16: Problem of smoking

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hok-fung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 27):

Question:

The findings of a survey conducted in the 2019-2020 financial year indicated that, among the respondents aged 25 or below, the ratio of persons who used electronic smoking products and heated tobacco products (alternative smoking products (ASPs)) was as high as 86 per cent. Regarding the problem of smoking, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that upon the Smoking (Public Health) (Amendment) Ordinance 2021 formally coming into force on April 30 this year, ASPs cannot be imported to Hong Kong, whether the Government has assessed if the youth who are used to patronising ASPs will switch to smoking conventional cigarettes; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, whether it has formulated any contingency plans; if the assessment outcome is in the negative, of the reasons for that;

(2) as it is reported that in recent months, there have been quite a number of online promotions of and advertisements for cheap cigarettes (commonly known as "cheap whites"), the prices of which are about one-third lower than those of traditional brands, whether the Government has gained an understanding of the reasons why the prices of such type of cigarettes are lower, as well as the age groups of customers (if so, of the percentage of youth in those customers);

(3) given that according to the relevant manual issued by the World Health Organization, raising the prices of cigarettes by way of tobacco tax increase is the most effective tobacco control measure, whether the Government has introduced the relevant measures in accordance with the manual; if so, whether it has gained an understanding of the reasons why polarisation of prices for cigarettes still exists in the market; and

(4) given that quite a number of countries have set the target of reducing the smoking prevalence to 5 per cent with a view to achieving a tobacco endgame, whether the Government has drawn up a timetable for the relevant work; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

The reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Hok-fung is as follows:

(1) According to the surveys conducted by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) for the period from 2005 to 2019, the percentage of daily

smoker of conventional cigarettes (excluding alternative smoking products (ASPs)) in adolescents (aged 15-19) in Hong Kong has decreased from 3.5 per cent in 2005 to 1.0 per cent in 2017. In the 2019 survey, the number of conventional cigarette smokers in the samples taken from this age group was too small to provide an accurate estimate of the overall smoking prevalence. The above statistics revealed that the appeal of conventional cigarettes to local adolescents had been gradually decreasing.

On the other hand, the Thematic Household Survey Report No. 70 released by the C&SD in June 2020 showed that the percentages of daily electronic cigarette (e-cigarette) and heated tobacco product (HTP) users aged 15 and above in the local population were 0.1 per cent and 0.2 per cent in 2019 respectively. According to a school-based survey on smoking conducted by the University of Hong Kong in 2018-2019 that was published in the same report, the percentage of daily users of e-cigarettes or HTPs among Secondary 1 to 6 students at the time of the survey was 0.3 per cent, while the percentages of those who ever used e-cigarettes and HTPs were 7.7 per cent and 2.3 per cent respectively. By comparing the results of the two surveys above, it was observed that these new ASPs were more popular in the younger age groups.

In view of the emergence of ASPs and their health risks, the Government introduced the Smoking (Public Health) (Amendment) Bill 2019 to the Legislative Council (LegCo) in February 2019 to ban the import, manufacture, sale, distribution and advertisement of ASPs, including e-cigarettes and HTPs. The Bill was passed by the LegCo on October 21, 2021. Upon the Smoking (Public Health) (Amendment) Ordinance 2021 coming into effect on April 30, 2022, the Government will focus on assisting current users of e-cigarettes and HTPs to quit smoking and keep tabs on relevant data, especially those related to the activities and trends of consumption of various smoking products by adolescents, so as to make timely adjustment to the tobacco control policy. The most effective way to reduce the overall smoking population is to assist smokers to quit smoking and prevent non-smokers from picking up smoking. The Government will continue to adopt a multi-pronged approach to strengthen tobacco control, including legislation, enforcement, publicity, education, smoking cessation services, taxation, as well as introducing various measures such as the designation and continuous expansion of no smoking areas to contain the proliferation of tobacco use (including conventional cigarettes).

(2 and 3) According to Article 6 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control of the World Health Organization (WHO), raising tobacco price and tax is an important means of reducing tobacco consumption. The WHO encourages countries/areas to raise taxes on tobacco products periodically. Over the years, apart from strengthening its work on overall tobacco control, the Government has also been increasing tobacco duty to influence the prices of tobacco products. That said, in the absence of retail price control, tobacco products of different brands and retailers are sold at different prices in Hong Kong. In any case, it cannot be ruled out that there are cases of sale of smuggled duty-not-paid cigarettes (illicit cigarettes) acquired through illegal channels by lawbreakers.

Under the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 109), any person who

deals with, possesses, sells or buys illicit cigarettes commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a maximum penalty of a fine of \$1 million and imprisonment for two years. The Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) has been adopting a multi-faceted intelligence-led enforcement strategy comprising of upstream interception of cross-boundary smuggling operations, midstream enforcement against the storage and distribution of illicit cigarettes as well as downstream curbing of the selling and buying of illicit cigarettes to combat illicit cigarette activities in a holistic manner. The C&ED has also been keeping surveillance in various districts to reinforce its intelligence collection efforts, which includes monitoring cigarette retail prices on the market and investigating products with abnormal retail price. Resolute enforcement actions will be taken upon detection of illegal activities.

The number of illicit cigarette cases detected by the C&ED from 2019 to 2021 and relevant statistics are as follows:

	2019	2020	2021
Number of cases*	17 368	3 159	4 008
Number of illicit cigarettes seized (sticks)	55.5 million	205 million	427 million
Number of persons arrested	17 334 [228]	2 498 [40]	3 553 [59]

* Including compounded cases at border control points

[] Number of arrestees under the age of 21

The Government will continue to keep in view the recommendations by the WHO and views of the community, as well as closely monitor changes in cigarette retail prices and the overall smoking situation in Hong Kong, in a bid to review the prevailing tobacco duty rates at suitable junctures.

(4) The Government has set a target in "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong" to further reduce smoking prevalence to 7.8 per cent by 2025. The long-term goal of the Government is to eliminate smoking hazards. The Government will endeavour to strengthen the work focus on the following three major areas:

(a) conducting a comprehensive review on the current tobacco control policies, especially with regard to the hazards of second-hand smoking, and expand the scope of no smoking areas in Hong Kong as well as consider raising tobacco duty from time to time;

(b) strengthening our efforts in smoking cessation: at present, smoking prevalence among adolescents in Hong Kong has dropped to a very low level. Apart from endeavouring to deter the younger generation from picking up smoking, the Government must also proactively take forward measures to motivate smokers to quit smoking, especially for adolescents and women, as well as enhancing the smoking cessation services for e-cigarette and HTP

smokers; and

(c) Tobacco Endgame: promoting a smoke-free society is a major trend across the globe. Many countries have already set up the Tobacco Endgame and the respective timetable, as well as the goal of reducing smoking prevalence to 5 per cent. Hong Kong will also carry out the work towards the Tobacco Endgame proactively, launching a comprehensive tobacco control strategy, formulating a timetable and roadmap for the Tobacco Endgame, thereby steadily progressing towards the goal of a smoke-free Hong Kong.