April 14, 2020

Dr. Sonia Angell
State Health Officer
California Department of Public Health
PO Box 997377, MS 0500
Sacramento, CA 95899-7377

Re: Public Education on the Connection between Smoking/Vaping and COVID-19

Dear Dr. Angell:

I would like to thank you and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) for all you are doing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficult and decisive actions CDPH is taking are helping the state meet this moment and protecting Californians.

I am writing to alert you to emerging evidence suggesting that tobacco use generally, and the e-cigarette epidemic in particular, may be exposing broad swaths of the population to the most devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the number of cases in California rises and the number of deaths stack up, I urge you to pay particular attention and track tobacco use - including traditional cigarettes - among COVID-19 patients, both suspected and confirmed, in people of all ages. Although evidence of a linkage between tobacco use and COVID-19 severity is just emerging, I also urge you to continue the public smoking cessation campaigns, and to direct the public to resources to help them quit.

California, along with the rest of the nation and the world, was facing a host of immense challenges relating to e-cigarettes before the novel coronavirus outbreak, with the CDC reporting e-cigarette use amongst teenagers exploding in the US, increasing 135% in the last two years. With these students now at home, public health groups are educating parents and children on how to deal with their teenagers’ awful nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

We must do everything we can at this critical moment to protect Californians and save lives by slowing the spread of this invisible adversary. Every precious second, and every decision we make, has the capacity to save lives or put them at risk. That’s why arming the public with the
right information about the connections between tobacco use and COVID-19 is more important now than ever.

The World Health Organization has already sounded the alarm, warning that tobacco use can increase a person’s risk of suffering the worst and most deadly symptoms of COVID-19 and that highly social smoking devices like hookah can actually contribute to the virus’s spread. Studies have shown that smoking or vaping tobacco can be harmful to the body’s cardiovascular and respiratory systems; the very same systems that COVID-19 appears to attack so viciously. Research on more than 50,000 laboratory-confirmed cases in China shows that patients with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, chronic respiratory disease or cancer (conditions found more commonly in smokers than in non-smokers) are more likely to develop severe or fatal COVID-19 symptoms.

Dr. Jerome Adams, President Trump’s United States Surgeon General, appearing on national television, has drawn attention to the possibility that vaping could play a role in the COVID-19 spikes we have seen in younger populations, saying “There are theories that (the increase in cases in younger populations) could be because we know we have a higher proportion of people in the United States, and also in Italy, who vape.” Experts caution that those who vape may be more susceptible to the virus. “Chronic vaping seems to decrease immune function in the lungs...it makes sense that people who vape would be less likely to combat the COVID-19 virus,” said Dr. Dean Drosnes, an addition medication physician. If there was ever a time to encourage people of all ages to stop smoking and to stop using e-cigarettes to protect public health - it is right now.

The Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow, penned a blog post warning about the negative impacts of smoking and vaping on the lung’s ability to fight viruses like COVID-19:

“Vaping, like smoking, may also harm lung health. Whether it can lead to COPD is still unknown, but emerging evidence suggests that exposure to aerosols from e-cigarettes harms the cells of the lung and diminishes the ability to respond to infection. In one NIH-supported study, for instance, influenza virus-infected mice exposed to these aerosols had enhanced tissue damage and inflammation.”

Critics will argue that the science has yet to be settled, that more studies and peer-reviewed research must be done before we gavel down on the connection between tobacco products and COVID-19. I agree: that is why we need to collect the data. However, there is zero doubt that quitting smoking and vaping improves health in the short and long term with or without COVID-19. The state also does not have the luxury of time to ignore early warning signs of a link between tobacco use and COVID-19 severity, as the number of infections and deaths rise dramatically in cities, states, and countries around the world.

Instead, we should follow Governor Newsom’s call to do whatever it takes to keep people safe: “We will look back at these kinds of decisions as pivotal decisions. If we’re to be criticized at this moment, let us be criticized for taking this moment seriously. Let us be criticized for going full force and meeting the virus head-on.” Now is not the time for half-measures, but for aggressive action to protect as many lives as possible.
Guidance across the nation from the President, governors, and local leaders at the county, city, and community level has been designed to reduce the spread and impact of this virus as much as possible. With the World Health Organization, along with leading public health officials, warning people about the dangers of smoking and vaping during this pandemic it is critical that we take appropriate steps to protect public health by tracking the comorbidity of tobacco use and COVID-19, asking people to stop smoking and vaping now, and directing smokers and vapers to public cessation resources.

Thank you for your attention to this request. Please do not hesitate to contact my if we can be helpful in any way with your department’s COVID-19 response.

Sincerely,

Jerry Hill
Senator, 13th District

CC: Tam Ma, Office of Governor Gavin Newsom
    Monica Wagoner, California Department of Public Health