COVID-19 increases need to protect children from dangers of tobacco vaping addiction

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By Lindsey Freitas

In early April, the attorney general of Massachusetts partnered with healthcare professionals to release a health advisory warning to residents. It said that smoking and vaping could put them in the high-risk category for needing “hospitalization and advanced life support to survive” COVID-19.

Californians deserve the same warning from their public health officials.

As a first step, leading health organizations, along with state Senator Jerry Hill (D-San Mateo), sent a letter last month to California public health officials urging them to monitor tobacco use among the victims of COVID-19. Tracking this data could empower Californians to make healthy and potentially life-saving choices for themselves and their families.

During one of his daily briefings on California’s coronavirus crisis response, Gov. Gavin Newsom said: “We will look back at these moments as a critical decision.” Let’s not look back and wonder why we didn’t do more to protect our kids.

Long before this novel coronavirus arrived, California youth were being sentenced to a lifetime of addiction as the skyrocketing youth use of e-cigarettes swept the nation. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of young people who use e-cigarettes spiked by an alarming 135 percent nationwide, according to the National Youth Tobacco Survey. With candy-flavored products like “Mango Ice,” “Milkshake” and “Blueberry Muffin,” tobacco companies have hooked our children on nicotine, now putting them at greater risk in the face of a global pandemic.

Urging Californians to stop the use of cigarettes or e-cigarettes during this critical time could save lives and reduce hospital visits as resources across the nation are spread precariously thin. As leading experts urge parents to have honest conversations with their children about the dangers of smoking or using e-cigarettes, we have an opportunity to share potentially life-saving information about the threat tobacco products pose to their health during this unprecedented global pandemic.

This coronavirus is predominantly a disease of the respiratory system. The World Health Organization sounded the alarm early on the connection between tobacco use and the deadliest impacts of COVID-19. By tracking data on some 50,000 Chinese patients, doctors discovered that cases of the virus were more severe in those with certain health conditions known to be caused by smoking.

The damage that smoking can do to our lungs and immune systems have been well documented. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) links tobacco use to 40 percent of all cancers, as well as diseases such as emphysema and heart disease. The CDC has identified each of these conditions as factors that put people at higher risk for severe illness from the coronavirus.

Evidence of the negative health impacts of using e-cigarettes is still coming together, but health experts including the U.S. surgeon general are expressing concerns. Last month, Dr. Jerome Adams said that increases in the number of cases among young people could be “because we know we have a higher proportion of people in the United States who vape.”

Dr. Nora Volkow of the National Institute on Drug Abuse offers a dose of reality, stating, “vaping, like smoking, may also harm lung health ... emerging evidence suggests that exposure to aerosols from e-cigarettes harms the cells of the lung and diminishes the ability to respond to infection.” Medical and healthcare professionals outside the government sphere have echoed their concerns.

Even as our coronavirus curve begins to bend, there is still more we must do to improve public health, reduce the severity of the illness and limit its spread. California must do the sensible thing by encouraging and helping cigarette smokers and e-cigarette users to quit as part of our fight against COVID-19.

What’s the worst that could happen? Adults and kids alike might finally find the motivation to end their deadly addictions, saving lives and allowing all of us to breathe a little easier.

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