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China plans to implement e-cigarette regulations

Shan Juan in Abu Dhabi

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China is set to regulate the production, sale and use of increasingly popular e-cigarettes, according to a senior health official.

The move is aimed at protecting people from the new nicotine-delivering alternative to traditional cigarettes, the official said.

Mao Qun'an, spokesman for the National Health and Family Planning Commission, made the remarks on the sidelines of the ongoing 16th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Abu Dhabi.

China has the highest number of smokers in the world — about 350 million — and supplies more than 80 percent of e-cigarettes globally in a market valued at \$3 billion. But e-cigarettes in the country are not covered by any regulations. “E-cigarettes have rapidly become popular across the world. China will act ... to protect people, particularly as the nation has reached a crucial stage for tobacco control in general,” Mao said.

“The health authority will coordinate related agencies and lobby for regulation of the sector,” he said.

However, Mao said there are uncertainties surrounding the issue — such as how to regulate the emerging product — and more research needs to be done to find a proper solution.

Due to the lack of regulation, e-cigarettes are widely available in China on the streets or at online stores.

“They target the young with a variety of fancy flavors, and have become another public health concern,” Mao said.

Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization, said, “They will attract young people to smoking, and I recommend that national

governments abandon or at least regulate them.”

According to Douglas Bettcher, director of the WHO’s Noncommunicable Diseases Prevention Department, countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Brazil have banned e-cigarettes, while others have regulated them as tobacco products or as medicinal products. “But the bottom line is to regulate them,” he said.

Steps and approaches to be taken have to be decided by governments according to their local context and their implementation capacity, Bettcher added.

He suggested regulations to maximize potential health opportunities and to minimize the number of nonsmokers taking to e-cigarettes.

Suggestions by the WHO on e-cigarettes include preventing their use among nonsmokers, particularly the young, prohibiting unproven health claims, and banning or restricting advertising and promotion.

Bettcher called for immediate action, saying the tobacco industry has made inroads into the increasingly profitable sector.

Li Baojiang, deputy director of the Economic Research Institute at the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration, has said that work has started on the research and development of e-cigarette patents and brand names.

He said that in 2013 there were about 900 e-cigarette manufacturers in China, a year-on-year increase of 200 percent. Exports of e-cigarettes in 2013 were valued at 3.5 billion yuan (\$570 million), a year-on-year increase of 150 percent.

“Overseas producers are tapping into the Chinese market,” he said.

Vivek Murthy, the United States’ surgeon general, said he is concerned about e-cigarettes and “this is an area where we are in desperate need of clarity”.

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