

March 24, 2014

**Y.H.A.N.**

HL29.1.4

Dear Chair Joe Mihevc, Dr. David McKeown, and Members of the Toronto Board of Health,

The Youth Health Action Network (YHAN) is an established group of youth from across the City of Toronto. We are passionate about taking action on health issues affecting young Torontonians through peer education and advocacy, namely in the area of tobacco control.

Thank you for the opportunity to present a response to this report. As youth, we commend the Board of Health and the Medical Officer of Health for continuing to take action to protect Torontonians from the harmful effects of smoking. We agree that while the majority of individuals are aware of the adverse health effects associated with tobacco use, many are unfamiliar with the health risks linked to waterpipe smoking. This is an enormous concern for the YHAN, as we have observed an increasing popularity of the practice, especially amongst young people in Toronto.

With over 65 waterpipe smoking bars and restaurants in Toronto, many of which are located near colleges and universities, waterpipe smoking has become a popular new trend among youth and young adults. 41% of Canadian youth aged 15-24 have reported ever smoking a waterpipe (Health Canada, 2012), and its use is becoming more common among those of non-Middle Eastern origin, where the practice is indigenous (Perley & Gonsalvez, 2014). The relatively low cost, easy access, appeal of flavoured shisha, and misperceptions about its safety attract youth to engage in this practice without being informed of the risks. Waterpipe use also normalizes smoking in public, giving the impression that smoking is socially acceptable, and it can act as a gateway to the use of cigarettes and other harmful drugs.

Surprisingly, waterpipe smoking has even been integrated into post-secondary culture, appearing at orientation events at Ryerson University, University of Toronto and York University. It has also made its way into pop culture. A blogTO article cited waterpipe smoking as a “fashionable and elite alternative to smoking cigarettes”; a Groupon offer has been spotted with discounted fees to “enjoy the café’s 44 flavours of hookah” and “take a well-earned puff” to celebrate a special moment; and hip hop icon Drake, a local celebrity and role model to many youth in Toronto, features waterpipe smoking in at least two of his music videos, “No Lie” and “Started From the Bottom”.

We have interviewed youth ages 18-24 on the street, and have learned that many of them are misinformed about the potential harms associated with waterpipe smoking. Some considered it to be the “easy way of getting away with smoking” and simply a “little cool fun thing to do”.

27% of Canadians believe that waterpipe smoking is less harmful than smoking cigarettes (Health Canada, 2012). In reality, the water in the pipe does not filter out dangerous chemicals and instead cools and moisturizes the smoke, making it less irritating to the throat and lungs ((Non-Smokers’ Rights Association/Smoking and Health Action Foundation, 2011). As the report highlights, there are well-established health risks for the user and non-user exposed to second-hand smoke when

tobacco shisha is smoked, and there is emerging research of the unsafe indoor air quality produced when non-tobacco shisha is smoked. This evidence cannot be dismissed.

As the YHAN, we continue our efforts to raise awareness among youth of the harmful effects of waterpipe smoking, however we urge the BOH to take action at the policy level. As the report highlights, other jurisdictions in Canada such as Alberta, Vancouver, Barrie and Peterborough have already introduced legislation to curb this trend, including an outright ban on the smoking of tobacco-like products in indoor public places. Even countries where waterpipe smoking is indigenous like Turkey and Saudi Arabia have outlawed the practice in public places (Sathya, 2013). As the largest municipality in Canada with arguably the highest density of waterpipe smoking establishments, and the greatest diversity of cultures, it's time for Toronto to be a leader and take similar policy actions. The Youth Health Action Network recommends that the Board of Health:

- Request the Federal Minister of Health to treat non-tobacco shisha like other commercial tobacco products, requiring the package label to include graphic health warnings, nicotine content, and non-misleading claims
- Request the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care to amend the Smoke Free Ontario Act to include a ban on smoking of non-tobacco products in enclosed public spaces, workplaces and on restaurant and bar patios
- Consider an amendment to the Municipal Code, Chapter 709, Smoking, that would include a ban on smoking of non-tobacco products in enclosed public spaces, workplaces and on restaurant and bar patios, if no provincial action is taken by the end of 2014.

We believe that it is dangerous to wait for what might be considered by some as "sufficient" scientific evidence regarding the health effects of non-tobacco waterpipe smoking before taking action, a mistake previously made with the issue of cigarette smoking. Regardless of the breadth of health evidence, the fact remains that waterpipe use in public increases the visibility of smoking and gives the impression that smoking is socially acceptable. We cannot afford to compromise the many successes of the Smoke-Free Ontario Act in discouraging children and youth from smoking by decreasing its visibility in public. Taking action at this stage would reinforce these successes while also protecting the public as the health effects of non-tobacco waterpipe smoking continue to be validated. We strongly encourage the Board of Health to thoughtfully consider our recommendations and those outlined in the report presented today.

Regards,

The Youth Health Action Network

## References

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