Treat e-cigarettes just like the real kind

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The stats on smoking are as dreadful as they are indisputable: More than 10 times as many Americans have died prematurely from smoking than have died in all the wars fought by the United States; smoking harms every organ of your body; smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States. For these reasons, San Francisco is joining with other major U.S. cities and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention by taking a "better safe than sorry" approach to e-cigarettes in proposing legislation to limit them.

Today we take these unfortunate statistics on smoking's links to disease for granted, but that wasn't always the case. From the 1920s to the 1950s, tobacco manufacturers were getting customers fatally hooked with enticing advertisements such as "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette."

Outrageous as such a slogan may sound, today we may be facing a similar situation with e-cigarettes, the latest incarnation of "nicotine sticks" to hit the market. Despite the allure and glamour of e-cigarette-wielding celebrities and the deep pockets of their manufacturers, the simple truth is that the health effects of e-cigarettes, especially long term, are unknown. Existing research, however, suggests that there are potential risks, including exposure to carcinogens, toxic substances and high levels of addictive nicotine.

Further, with every puff and vapor exchange, e-cigarettes can be smelled, creating potentially new pollution issues. They spew secondhand aerosols, and that air pollution contains unregulated amounts of a variety of harmful toxic substances and cancer-causing agents, not to mention nicotine.

Another pressing issue for e-cigarettes, similar to regular cigarettes, is whether they will become an entry point for young people to begin smoking regular cigarettes.

Today there are more than 250 brands of e-cigs available - in flavors such as watermelon, bubble gum, cotton candy, gummy bear, candy cane and strawberry. Clearly, manufacturers are aiming their marketing efforts at our vulnerable youth. Chances are you wouldn't let your son ride his bike to school without a helmet; is letting him use "fake cigarettes" worth the unknown risk?

Like their lung-damaging cousins in decades past, most of what is perceived about e-cigarettes has been shaped by the e-cigarette companies. Despite claims that they're a "safe" alternative to regular cigarettes - and a great way to quit smoking tobacco - there is zero independent science to back this up.

As we continue to learn more about the harmful effects of these nicotine newcomers, it's our job as local lawmakers and health advocates to apply the same rules to e-cigarettes as to cigarettes. San Francisco's proposed legislation will not prohibit the use or sale of e-cigarettes. Rather, the legislation will bring their use and sale into line with tobacco cigarettes, whose sale to minors is banned and use in public places regulated, and which are taxed at 87 cents per pack.

My e-cigs legislative proposal is supported by our partners at the Tobacco Free Coalition, UCSF researchers, the San Francisco Unified School District, and many youth and health organizations. This is a commonsense approach that gives businesses, the public and law enforcement clear guidelines for this new nicotine product.

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