




Speech By
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HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms PUGH** (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (5.01 pm): I rise today to address the health bill and specifically I would like to address the parts of the bill that work to curtail the rise of vaping right across our community and Australia wide. I come from a generation where smoking in nightclubs, pubs and near buildings was the norm. I remember somebody lighting up inside a McDonald's when I was sitting next to them once. We always came home wreaking of second-hand smoke after a night out, and nobody ever complained about this; it was a fact of life. Smoking everywhere was commonplace. Eventually, as the tide and social opinion turned, the commitment to stamp out smoking was equally universal in its commitment.

We now know, of course, that smoking causes cancer and the health campaigns to change societal attitudes were very successful, and they worked to significantly lower smoking rates in Queensland. A large part of that success in lowering those rates was, of course, cessation devices like patches, and vapes have historically played a cessation role as well.

I look to my own family. My mum and aunts showed incredible commitment and quit smoking. I hope it is clear to everybody that I would never judge anybody who partakes of an addictive substance like vapes or cigarettes. That is why we always need to have a compassionate approach that treats this issue as addiction and not as a moral shortcoming.

I was talking to a colleague today about this bill and I reflected that, in more ways than one, vapes are a bit like cane toads. We all know that cane toads were introduced to Queensland to rid us of the terrible problem of cane beetles. How did that go? I do not know if I have ever seen a cane beetle in my life, but I sure know what a cane toad looks like. I have spoken of the ubiquity of cigarettes for my generation, but my children were well into primary school before they ever laid eyes on somebody smoking a cigarette. However, for their generation now, vapes are absolutely everywhere including, as previous speakers have mentioned, in schools. The point I make is that sometimes the solution can be just as bad as the issue you are seeking to address in the first place. We all know that smoking has many drawbacks, but what we have replaced it with is equally terrifying.

As previous speakers have mentioned, we are currently witnessing nothing short of a public health crisis as vaping has taken root in our schools, in our parks and even in our homes. It is worth mentioning that, although many speakers have reflected on young people participating in vaping, there are many older Queenslanders who vape. The pervasive rise of vaping among Australians is an issue that does demand our collective and urgent action and consideration. I do not think this should be a matter for partisan debate. It is a shared responsibility that we have to safeguard the next generation from addiction and from long-term health consequences. I have been disappointed to hear some members opposite acting as if this is not a bipartisan issue that we all care about very deeply.

The statistics are alarming. We see report after report of young people becoming addicted to nicotine at unprecedented rates. It is easy to be drawn in by the deceptive marketing, the attractive flavours and the insidious ease of access to these dangerous products, and when you contrast that with the world-leading Australian smoking packaging that is deliberately ugly and off-putting the contrast is

all the more clear. The notion that vapes are a safe alternative has been thoroughly debunked many times over. Vapes are not harmless. They are not benign. They are a gateway to addiction and their long-term health impacts are only just beginning to reveal themselves.

This legislation strengthens our ability to fight back against those who seek to profit from the ill health and addiction of Queenslanders, especially our young people. It empowers our enforcement agencies to disrupt the black market that is currently flooding our communities with these harmful devices.

As the committee report notes—and this is not a direct quote from the committee report but a translation—it is recognised that, while previous efforts from the state and Commonwealth governments have made inroads, some operators continue to trade illegally because of the high profitability of supplying illicit vaping goods. In the committee report it is noted that Queensland Health advised that since 1 October 2024 more than 150,000 vapes have been seized, with a street value of over \$5 million.

The provisions allowing for the immediate forfeiture and destruction of illicit vaping products are an important step forward. We cannot afford for these devices to simply be confiscated and then re-enter the market. They must be removed from circulation entirely, sending a strong deterrent message to those involved in this unlawful trade. This streamlined enforcement process is a necessary evolution of our legal framework to meet the scale of the challenge.

I am particularly pleased to see the legislation clearly define ‘illicit nicotine products’ to include vaping goods, regardless of their advertised nicotine content. In discussions with some of the committee members—and I thank the member for South Brisbane for her assistance in consideration of this—it is really important to note that, however vapes are advertised, they are not harmless and they are not nicotine-free products. The problem we have with vapes is that it is just so unclear what is in them. There are some excellent resources on the Queensland Health website that outline the many dangerous and deadly products that make up vapes.

The alignment of our state’s efforts with the Commonwealth’s ban on the importation and supply of non-therapeutic vapes is also really important. This unified approach, working across jurisdictions, is essential to stem the tide of illicit vaping products entering into our state. We cannot hope to effectively tackle this problem in isolation. It requires a coordinated and robust response from all levels of government. I noted earlier that Australia has previously been a world leader in tackling nicotine addiction with the response that we had with our cigarette packets, and a similarly innovative approach to tackling vapes in the future is certainly something we are capable of doing again. We should rise to that challenge, because vaping poses just as much of a challenge to health as cigarettes posed all of those years ago.

Beyond the explicit enforcement measures, I also note the broader impact these provisions will have on our public health messaging. By tightening these legislative screws, we can reinforce campaigns like ‘There’s nothing sweet about vapes’ and support cessation programs. Our laws are not just about punishment; they are about education, prevention and reinforcing the message that vaping is not a harmless trend but a serious health threat.

I reflect on historical campaigns run about cigarettes. There was a very successful campaign that I think really underpinned societal attitudes around smoking. It was not a campaign based on shame. The ‘Nobody smokes here anymore’ campaign is one I particularly remember as being quite effective in terms of starting to make inroads into the public’s mindset. In many ways, I think that vapes pose a greater threat in terms of attracting and addicting young users than cigarettes because cigarettes obviously do not taste great and they do not smell great. Vapes are sweet, they are easy to use and they are easier to mask after you have used them. It is harder to pick up the smell of somebody who vapes, which means you cannot have an intervening conversation with a young person earlier. All of these things mean that vapes are so much more insidious.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that vaping is truly a modern health scourge of our time. As an opposition, we are very supportive of the changes this legislation proposes to allow vapes to be properly regulated, to intervene earlier and to prevent young people from becoming addicted to these insidious devices. The protection of our children from the grip of vaping is a really important issue. I certainly will be strongly supporting the measures in the bill that pertain to that. Other members of the opposition have outlined the aspects of the bill that do not pertain to vaping that we do have some concerns with. I have run out of time to canvass those, but I will be supporting the measures that pertain to vaping.