E-cigarettes have role in employers’ smoking cessation policies, says Public Health England

Employers can endorse the use of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) in helping smokers give up the habit according to new advice from the UK government health improvement agency Public Health England (PHE). The advice is contained in new PHE guidance on the use of e-cigarettes in the workplace and is qualified by the caution that employers should avoid any action that encourages non-smokers to take up vaping.

PHE said its framework, Use of e-cigarettes in public places and workplaces. Advice to inform evidence-based policy making, [1] is designed to help employers support smokers quitting, while managing any risks specific to their setting.

The framework includes five principles for organisations to consider when creating a vaping policy. It acknowledges that workplace environments vary and “there is no one-size-fits-all approach”.

The principles are: 1. Make clear the distinction between vaping and smoking; 2. Ensure policies are informed by the evidence on health risks to bystanders; 3. Identify and manage risks of vapour uptake by children and young people; 4. Support smokers to stop smoking and stay smoke-free; and 5. Support compliance with smoke-free law and policies.

The first principle advises organisations to avoid using smoking terminology when referring to e-cigarettes. E-cigarette use is known as “vaping” and e-cigarette users are often known as “vapers”, it says.

Principle two recommends that e-cigarette use is not routinely included in the requirements of an organisation’s smoke-free policy; however reasons other than the health risk to those nearby may exist for prohibiting e-cigarette use. These include commercial considerations and professional etiquette.

The third principle deals with smoking and vaping in front of children and supporting young people not to smoke,
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while the fourth one states that recognising the benefits of e-cigarettes “should be at the centre of policies on e-cigarette use in public places and workplaces”. Vapers must not share the same outdoor space with smokers, it says.

Principle five advises organisations to clearly communicate their e-cigarette policies so everybody in the workplace understands where vaping is and is not allowed. This involves using signs where possible.

Professor Kevin Fenton, national director of health and wellbeing at PHE, said: “The evidence is clear that vaping is much less harmful that smoking and that e-cigarettes are helping many smokers quit.

“The new framework will encourage organisations to consider both the benefits and the risks when developing their own policies on e-cigarettes. Different approaches will be appropriate in different places, but policies should take account of the evidence and clearly distinguish vaping from smoking.”

The framework advice was created following extensive stakeholder consultation and has been published to coincide with a national stakeholder symposium on e-cigarettes and their role in tobacco harm reduction, held jointly with Cancer Research UK.

Welcoming the new framework, Dr Sally Coomber, president of the Society of Occupational Medicine, said: “Occupational health practitioners have an important role in shaping non-smoking policies in their organisations. They should be aware of the new PHE guidance and decide how best this should be reflected in their local policy depending on the particular employment setting.

“The five principles in the PHE guidance articulate the need to distinguish clearly between smoking and vaping, and to strike a balance between enabling e-cigarette use to help existing smokers to cut down and stop, whilst avoiding any encouragement of uptake of e-cigarettes among non-smokers (especially young people). Employers may also be interested to consider other factors associated with e-cigarettes, such as their reduced fire risk or security issues for electronic devices in certain work environments.

“We believe workplaces should review their policies in light of this guidance, with the support of occupational health professionals, and that e-cigarettes do have a role to play in stopping people smoking – but it must be approached in the right way.”

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