

All Party Parliamentary Group on Smoking and Health

Shisha evidence

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Submitted on an individual basis.

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Note: I have asked for shisha illicit data from three local authorities in London, to add to the following data.

Introduction

Shisha smoking (known as hookah/nargile/hubble bubble/waterpipe) is a 600-year old method for smoking tobacco after it has been passed through water. Research into this smoking practice has established similar health effects to those caused by cigarette smoking(1-3), and popularity is increasing worldwide(4). In the UK there is very little research, however it is understood the prevalence amongst university students lies between 7-11%(5, 6), and for secondary school students at 12%(7); double that of cigarette prevalence. Since 2007 there has been a 200% rise in shisha bars in the United Kingdom(8), and in northwest London there is a strong correlation between the number of cafes in close proximity to a secondary school and the average shisha prevalence of that school(7).

Shisha is generally smoked in commercial venues (bars, restaurants, cafes), although shisha tobacco can be purchased in many retail outlets. It usually comes in a 50g packet costing £5, and is a free, wet mixture composed of 30% tobacco and 70% honey and flavourings(9). Those who self-assemble their pipe use approximately 10g per session, which can last up to an hour(10). However, those who smoke shisha in cafes will have their pipe assembled by staff, and are hence unable to see the tobacco packaging or tobacco mixture which is hidden inside the apparatus.

Shisha smoking and the illicit trade

Most shisha tobacco in the UK is indeed illicit and duty unpaid(11), and the shisha industry operates in a largely unregulated environment(12). The biggest concern is importing duty unpaid shisha tobacco from abroad, mainly from the Middle East. There have been numerous reports of seized shisha tobacco at airports. In November 2012, £60,000 (291kg) of illicit shisha tobacco was seized at Heathrow Airport (investigated by John Cooper, assistant director for criminal investigation at HMRC)(13).

Shisha tobacco packaging does not comply with the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control(14). Packaging displays bright colours, fruits, with little or no mention of the word tobacco. A recent study identified less than health warnings on shisha tobacco packaging and its accessories covered a surface area of less than 3%, whereas the recommendation is 30%(15). An example of shisha tobacco packaging is shown in Figure 1.

Shisha tobacco packaging also displays misleading descriptors such as “0.05% nicotine”, “0% tar” and “100% natural flavours”, whereas in contrast one session of shisha can produce 50x more tar and twice as much nicotine as a single cigarette(10), which does not correlate with what is displayed on its packaging(16).

In the UK, shisha smoking is already covered by the smokefree law. Where smoking still takes place indoors, the air quality of shisha cafes is poor(17), arguably worse than in restaurants where cigarette smoking was once permitted(18). Secondhand shisha smoke may equate to 10 cigarettes’ worth of toxicant exposure(19). Since the implementation of the smokefree law in England, one study identified that shisha use may have increased due to shisha being perceived as a safer alternative to cigarettes or to aid cessation(20).

Preliminary data gathered from local boroughs shows shisha is a growing legislative issue. In northwest London, one local authority seized 161.5kg of illicit shisha tobacco from six commercial shisha venues (equivalent in weight to over 130,000 cigarettes), and 25 cafes are known to be non-compliant with smokefree legislation. In east London, one borough spend £1,200,000 over two years working in a multi-disciplinary setting to combat the illicit shisha tobacco trade, reducing the number of cafes from 32 to 9. In one café, 20kg of illicit shisha tobacco was seized (equivalent in weight to over 16,500 cigarettes). Other boroughs have had similar problems with the illicit shisha trade; local authority reports are available on request.

Legislative recommendations are outlined in the supporting documentation.

Figure 1: An example of shisha tobacco packaging



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