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The Honourable Roger Cook MLA
Deputy Premier; Minister for Health; Mental Health
13th Floor Dumas House
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Dear Deputy Premier,

Further to your conversation with Professor Bruce Maycock at the Bob Elphick Award breakfast, this briefing note highlights research the Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health (CERIPH) based at *Curtin University* is undertaking into e-cigarettes in the online, and bricks and mortar environment. Below is a summary of this research.

Online e-cigarette environment

Our research into e-cigarettes indicates that positive sentiment continues to dominate the discourse surrounding e-cigarettes on Twitter; and vape retailers and manufacturers, the general public and vape proponents are the most prominent posters of e-cigarette content. Despite Australia's cautious approach to e-cigarettes and the limited evidence supporting them as an efficacious smoking cessation aid, it is clear that these dominant groups are promoting e-cigarettes as a health conducive, smoking cessation product, and using Twitter to circumvent Australian regulations while advocating for a more liberal approach to personal vaporisers. Vape proponents imply that Federal Government agencies lack sufficient competence and the evidence for the policies they endorse around vaping. The borderless nature of social media presents a new and growing challenge for public health to counter inaccurate and unfounded claims about products such as e-cigarettes. We aim to address this in our future research.

In addition, our research into Philip Morris International's (PMI) corporate communications has found they are openly challenging Australia's existing e-cigarette regulations and garnering public support for broader access to nicotine containing e-cigarette products. PMI argue that their e-cigarette and heat not burn products are safer options, reducing the presence of harmful chemicals inhaled by smokers. PMI is positioning itself as a 'Good Corporate Citizen', working to better the health of current smokers, while equally positioning Government and health authorities as failing to collaborate with the tobacco industry to 'solve' the ongoing issue of smoking, while ignoring consumer demand for 'safer' alternatives. According to PMI's communication materials, Australian consumers' rights are being infringed, leaving them condemned to smoking harmful combustible cigarettes. Being aware of how transnational tobacco corporations use communication platforms to influence opinion and e-cigarette legislation, emphasises the need for vigilance and strong evidence-based counter arguments.

Bricks and mortar e-cigarette environment

Our recent audit of vape stores in Perth identified 98 retailers selling e-cigarette products, comprising vape shops, tobacconists, smoke shops, service stations and supermarkets. Most reported selling 'non-nicotine' e-liquid, and parts of e-cigarette devices and accessories. Several loopholes are being taken advantage of by most e-cigarette retailers to allow customers to buy the whole e-cigarette device. These include having two separate stores adjacent to each other, one store selling the mod (main part of the device that contains the battery) and the other, the tank (part of the device that holds the e-liquid); two business names with the second store fully online, or selling the device through two unrelated stores located adjacent to each other (e.g. tobacconist and newsagency). Sales promotion techniques being used include point-of-sale displays, free samples, and monetary discounts. The current legislation is not deterring stores from promoting and selling e-cigarette products and these stores are proliferating. The first Perth vape shop opened just two years before this study, an expanding industry.

Our adherence to the precautionary approach has left us in a far better position than other countries, and we support the Government's current stance on e-cigarettes. However, the online environment presents many challenges for public health. We aim to contribute to solutions via research grants we are currently developing, which will employ innovative computational science techniques to determine how to more efficiently and effectively harness digital technology for public health issues. We expect this research will guide public health advocates in responding to health issues in real-time on social media by countering misinformation and inappropriate practices.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our research with you or your team. If you would like further information or a meeting, then please contact me at any time. We look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Jonine Jancey
Associate Professor, School of Public Health

On behalf of the research team, Prof Bruce Maycock, A/Prof Tama Leaver, Dr Katharina Wolf, Dr Becky Freeman, Ms Kahlia McCausland.