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Press Release

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From deadly to desirable: how the tobacco industry dupes our youth

As World No Tobacco Day (31 May) approaches, the global theme for 2025, “Unmasking the appeal: exposing industry tactics on tobacco and nicotine products,” resonates with chilling urgency in South Africa. Amid a surge of tobacco and e-cigarette use driven by marketing tactics targeting youth, experts and advocacy groups are calling for decisive action.

A new national survey conducted for the African Centre for Tobacco Industry Monitoring and Policy Research (ATIM) based at the University of Pretoria reveals that tobacco smoking in South Africa has hit a high of 33.9% or 14.9 million people, a prevalence level last seen in 1993. Use of novel tobacco products like e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products (HTPs), and oral nicotine pouches among young people aged 16-34 has risen to 13.5% or 2.6 million young people.

"Tobacco and novel product trends are going up in parallel, indicating that people are not switching. We are simply adding harm," warns Professor Lekan Ayo-Yusuf, Head of the School of Health Systems and Public Health at the University of Pretoria and Director of ATIM. "We must take urgent action to turn this around."

United as Protect Our Next, health and community NPOs amplify awareness of the industry's deceitful tactics and rally support for stricter control measures. This May, Protect our Next has put the tobacco industry on 'trial', setting up mock crime scenes in public spaces to expose how Big Tobacco is targeting teens. Communities and schools are invited to "lay a charge" against Big Tobacco, adding their stories, testimonies, and evidence to make the case for urgent regulation.

Lesego Mateme of the South African Tobacco-Free Youth Forum (SATFYF) highlights how the tobacco industry employs aggressive and calculated strategies to appeal directly to young people. "Flavoured products disguise the harshness of nicotine and tobacco, making them enticing to first-time users. The sleek and concealable designs of devices like e-cigarettes make these products easy for kids to hide from parents and teachers. Marketing campaigns are clearly designed to resonate with young audiences."

"Misleading messaging promotes e-cigarettes and similar products as "safer" alternatives, fostering a deceptive sense of security," he continues. "Social media and influencers are leveraged to glamourise their products, while point-of-sale (POS) advertising ensures that these products are prominently displayed in convenience stores near schools."

Recent research shines a harsh spotlight on how the tobacco industry courts the youth market in South Africa. The Big Tobacco, Tiny Targets study (2023) conducted by SATFYF revealed a deliberate strategy to embed tobacco products near schools,

where 68.2% of point-of-sale (POS) locations displayed products at child eye level and over half placed them near sweets or snacks. 66.5% of POS sold single cigarettes, making them more affordable and accessible to youth, while almost 70% of these outlets sold flavoured cigarettes designed to lure young first-time users.

Similarly, the SAMRC National University Students Study found that 76.4% of university students reported exposure to e-cigarette advertisements, with promotions such as free samples and discounts amplifying use. Students exposed to e-cigarette or hookah marketing were twice as likely to use these products, and exposure to promotions increased the likelihood fourfold.

"The tobacco industry is relentless," says Professor Catherine Egbe, Senior Specialist Scientist in the Mental Health, Alcohol, Substance Use and Tobacco Research Unit (MASTRU) at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). "From exploiting online platforms to ensuring easy access, it uses every avenue and deliberate tactics to normalise addiction under the guise of trendy, flavoured products targeted at young people."

The human toll

Decades of research validate the devastating harm of tobacco use, compounded today by new nicotine products. "Nicotine can disrupt brain development in adolescents and deepens addiction," says Prof Egbe. "Far from offering harm reduction, these products intensify risk through dual use alongside traditional cigarettes, and are more like harm re-introduction. Several studies have shown that e-cigarettes are a gateway to smoking traditional cigarettes, thus perpetuating nicotine addiction."

Professor Pamela Naidoo of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa highlights that smoking significantly increases the risk of non-communicable diseases like heart disease and strokes, that are very preventable. "NCDs are preventable, so why increase your risks from a young age? Smoking accounts for nearly 50% of heart disease cases in South Africa. Vaping has also been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease. Long-term vaping can damage blood vessels, raise blood pressure, and increase heart rate, all of which contribute to heart disease and strokes."

"South African youth are under siege by an industry that puts profits ahead of lives. If we fail to intervene, the next generation will pay the price with their health," says Lorraine Govender, National Manager of Health Promotion at the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA). "We urgently need stronger tobacco control measures to ban child-friendly flavours, restrict advertising, and enforce age verification. Education campaigns must expose the dangers of vaping, there should be better control of influencer marketing on social platforms, and higher taxes should be imposed to discourage use. We must also provide accessible support for young people looking to quit."

Policy at a crossroads

The Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill, currently in a Parliament offers a blueprint for reform. Key provisions include 100% smoke-free

indoor public places and certain outdoor places, prohibiting the sale of tobacco and vaping products to anyone under 18, mandating standardized packaging with graphic health warnings on packages, extending the ban on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship to include e-cigarettes and hookah as well as POS advertising, and regulating electronic delivery systems like e-cigarettes (vapes) which are currently not regulated under the current law.

"This bill represents our chance to break cycles of addiction, disease and suffering," says Prof Ayo-Yusuf. "Smoking-related illnesses claim about 40 000 South African lives annually and put enormous pressure on our public health system. South Africa must value the health of its citizens over corporate greed. It's time to align with global best practices and protect public health."

"Every delay in passing this legislation means more lives put at risk," concludes Prof Egbe. "This year's World No Tobacco Day must stand as a watershed moment for action in South Africa. Stakeholders are urged to rally behind legislative reforms, demand accountability from the tobacco industry, and safeguard the nation's future from preventable harm. There is no more time to lose."

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Professor Pamela Naidoo, Health Promotions Team, and Dietitians. To co-ordinate and confirm interview dates you are welcome to contact Mr. Themba Mzondi, our PR and Communications Officer on 021 422 1586 / 078 113 5216 or email themba.mzondi@heartfoundation.co.za

About the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) plays a leading role in the fight against preventable heart disease and stroke, with the aim of seeing fewer people in South Africa suffer premature deaths and disabilities. The HSFSA, established in 1980 is a non-governmental, non-profit organization which relies on external funding to sustain the work it carries out.

The HSFSA aims to reduce the cardiovascular disease (CVD) burden in South Africa and ultimately on the health care system of South Africa. Our mission is to empower people in South Africa to adopt healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices easier, seek appropriate care and encourage prevention.

For more information visit www.heartfoundation.co.za. You can also find us on www.facebook.com/HeartStrokeSA, www.x.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa

