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WNTD #GameOver Campaign Launch Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

YOUTH-LED #GAMEOVER CAMPAIGN CHALLENGES BIG TOBACCO TARGETING AHEAD OF WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY 2026

Johannesburg, South Africa — As part of Tobacco Awareness Month (#WNTMay) ahead of World No Tobacco Day on 31 May 2026, The JA! Project, together with partners across the tobacco control, public health and advocacy sectors, is officially launching the #GameOver Campaign — a youth-led advocacy initiative designed to expose and challenge tobacco and nicotine industry tactics targeting young people.

The campaign comes amid growing concern around the rapid rise of youth vaping and nicotine use in South Africa, particularly among high school learners. Through flavoured products, influencer culture, digital visibility and lifestyle positioning, nicotine products are increasingly being normalised within youth culture.

According to recent South African research led by Professor Richard van Zyl-Smit and colleagues, 16.8% of high school learners currently vape, while 36.7% have tried vaping at least once. Among Grade 12 learners, vaping prevalence rises to nearly 30%, with almost half of young vapers reporting use within the first hour of waking, a key indicator of nicotine dependence.

The #GameOver Campaign seeks to translate complex industry tactics into accessible, youth-driven engagement that empowers young people to recognise, question and resist manipulation.

The campaign forms part of broader advocacy efforts aligned with ongoing tobacco control initiatives and policy discussions in South Africa, including efforts to strengthen protections for young people against emerging nicotine and tobacco products.

“The rise in youth vaping is not accidental. Young people are being deliberately targeted through sophisticated marketing, digital culture and engineered product appeal,” said Joash Daniel, Executive Director of The JA! Project.

“The goal of #GameOver is not only to raise awareness, but to equip young people to critically engage with these tactics, become advocates within their schools and communities, and help shape a healthier future.”

As part of the campaign rollout, The JA! Project recently hosted its JA May Session with Junior Advocates, where young people from multiple schools participated in discussions around vaping, peer pressure, digital influence and the role young people can play in protecting their generation.

Selected students will now form part of the #GameOver Ambassador cohort, helping to drive youth engagement, awareness and advocacy activities ahead of and beyond World No Tobacco Day.

On Wednesday, 27 May 2026, The JA! Project will host the #GameOver Youth Dialogue, an online engagement bringing together Junior Advocates, researchers, policymakers, public health organisations, civil society leaders and campaign partners for an intergenerational conversation around youth vaping and the future of tobacco control advocacy.

The dialogue is expected to feature contributors and partners from across the tobacco control ecosystem, including researchers, public health organisations, policy stakeholders and advocacy leaders.

Professor Lekan Ayo-Yusuf of ATIM, who will serve as the keynote contributor for the dialogue, said youth engagement remains critical to the future of tobacco control efforts across the continent.

“Young people are not only being targeted by the tobacco and nicotine industry. They are also among the most powerful voices capable of challenging it. Creating spaces where youth can engage directly with research, policy and advocacy is essential to building sustainable public health responses.”

Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, highlighted the importance of early prevention and youth-centred public health engagement.

“Young people today are navigating increasingly complex environments where nicotine products are often marketed in ways that appear harmless, modern or socially appealing. Public health efforts must therefore go beyond awareness alone and create meaningful opportunities for youth engagement, critical thinking and advocacy. Campaigns like #GameOver play an important role in empowering young people to make informed decisions and protect their long-term health.”

Representatives from TCDI also highlighted the importance of combining evidence, advocacy and youth engagement in addressing the growing challenge of youth nicotine use.

“World No Tobacco Day is an important opportunity to recognise that youth nicotine use is not happening in isolation. Vaping and emerging nicotine products are being made attractive to young

people through flavours, social influence, digital visibility and misleading perceptions of reduced harm,” said Thomas van Huyssteen, TCDI South Africa.

“The #GameOver Campaign is valuable because it combines youth voices, community engagement and evidence-based advocacy to expose these tactics and support stronger protection for young people.”

Representatives from public health, civil society and advocacy organisations participating in the campaign have also emphasised the importance of collaborative action across schools, households, communities and policy spaces.

The campaign will continue with a planned school-based #GameOver activation on 29 May 2026, where youth advocates, campaign partners and stakeholders will gather to publicly launch the initiative ahead of World No Tobacco Day.

The 2026 World No Tobacco Day theme highlights the urgent need to protect young people from industry manipulation and nicotine addiction, aligning closely with the campaign’s focus on exposing engineered appeal, digital targeting and youth-focused marketing tactics.

Rather than operating as a standalone awareness initiative, #GameOver is designed as an integrated advocacy platform connecting youth engagement, community dialogue, public awareness and broader tobacco control efforts.

“When the tactics are exposed, the game changes,” said Joash Daniel of The JA! Project.

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo, our Healthcare Professional Teams and partners. To coordinate 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_