

Time to Tackle the Basics of Tobacco Control: Revisiting a Ban on Cigarette Vending Machines in Ireland

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Abstract

Cigarette vending machines continue to pose a risk to comprehensive tobacco control. Ample evidence suggests that these machines are a routine access point for youth to cigarettes. A recent RCPI report proposing raising the legal age of tobacco purchase to 21 continues to underestimate the threat posed by cigarette vending machines. There are over 4,500 cigarette vending machines in Ireland, and recent evidence continues to highlight their use by underage smokers. Given such evidence and in light of international Conventions, such as the FCTC and the UNCRC, the Irish Government should ban cigarette vending machines as soon as possible.

Change is inevitable- except from a vending machine¹

Dear Editor,

The recently published Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI) report pushing for an increase in the minimum legal age to purchase tobacco to 21 is to be commended². As a commercial determinant of health tobacco remains a leading cause of global mortality and morbidity [3]. Any move therefore to decrease youth and young adult access to such carcinogenic products is positive.

The RCPI paper also notes evidence that the decline in youth smoking has stalled for the first time in 25 years². This stagnation is alarming. All pretence of Ireland achieving its smoke free target by 2025 has long been abandoned⁴, with 2037 now posited as a more likely target⁵, for what is, by international standards a relatively modest target of <5% smoking rate⁶. From a position as a world leader in tobacco control, through its introduction of the workplace smoking ban, Ireland has rested on its laurels for too long, and is now paying the price. It is time to look at fundamental steps that can quickly and easily be taken to attain the goal of a smoke-free society. One obvious step is to introduce an outright ban on cigarette vending machines. It is disappointing that the RCPI report fails to adequately address this crucial issue.

After discussing vending machines in Ireland the RCPI state that ‘the next step will be to develop a robust age verification system to ensure compliance in relation to any underage purchasers’². However, it is time to accept that vending machines have been an established conduit of cigarette access to children and under-age youths for decades⁸⁻¹¹.

The evidence for this is longstanding⁸⁻¹¹ and recent research confirms the importance of vending machines across Europe in the minority of countries which still permit their use¹². Evidence from the Environmental Health Service test-purchase audits continue to identify the use of vending machines in Ireland as a viable access route to cigarettes for young people⁵. Between 2018 and 2020 the percentage of successful prosecutions for breaking Section 24 of the Tobacco Act, which deals with sales to minors, emanating from purchases from vending machines varied from 45.5% to 71%⁵. Prosecutions are rare, with convictions rarer still. Even when successfully convicted the penalties imposed are minimal¹³.

The importance of this issue cannot be under-stated. It is highly probable that most people are unaware of the actual number of vending machines involved. The 2022 State of Tobacco Control in Ireland report noted that there were 4,644 vending machines operating in licensed premises/registered clubs⁵. A complete ban on tobacco vending machines in Ireland is the only solution.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

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