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## UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS ON E-CIGARETTES IS VITAL

I read with interest the Bostean et al., 2015 study on e-cigarette use among never-smoking California students.<sup>1</sup> The authors suggested that their study results provide empirical evidence on e-cigarette use, and propose that the results could be used for future e-cigarette regulation. Being an adolescent myself, I puzzled over the common sense validity of their proposal for stricter regulations to limit the availability of e-cigarettes to adolescents. I doubt that this strategy alone would effectively reduce the availability of e-cigarettes to adolescents.

Nonetheless, comprehensive prevention programs targeting adolescents are urgently needed. Prior to enactment of any potential legislation or policy strategy to curtail e-cigarette use by adolescents, a strong public educational and awareness campaign to correct common myths and misconceptions about e-cigarettes should be developed and implemented. The campaign should cover the following key issues about e-cigarettes: they are often presented as a safe tobacco alternative in

the scientific literature, the (news) media, and online product marketing Web sites; they are often promoted and marketed as a smoking cessation device; and they are overtly promoted as a therapeutic and safe alternative to tobacco.

My own Google search for (electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes), cessation aid, nicotine solution, inhalants, vaping, combustible cigarettes, health risks, gateway to tobacco use, adolescents, youth, online marketing, current international evidence base, policy position and clinical guidance) led me to the following August 2014 statement from the American Heart Association:

even if there are some intrinsic adverse health effects of e-cigarettes, there would be public benefit if e-cigarettes proved to be much less hazardous than combustible cigarettes and if smokers could switch entirely from conventional cigarettes to e-cigarettes.<sup>2</sup>

There also needs to be an effective social media campaign to enhance adolescents' knowledge about the ingredients in e-cigarettes and their potential side effects, and the known health hazards of prolonged use and misuse of e-cigarettes. It is also important that all online and television adolescent-targeted e-cigarette advertisements and promotions be regulated and restricted.

I am aware that some Web sites even explicitly promote e-cigarettes with candy and fruit flavors, and I believe that these advertisements unfairly target immature adolescents like us. Our brain is not fully developed, is constantly evolving or predominantly under construction, and can be adversely affected by high-risk behaviors. At times, adolescent judgments could be immature and lead to poor decision-making. Most of the time, we need appropriate and clear guidance from our parents, caregivers, teachers, public health experts, and clinicians to help us make the right public health decisions. We urgently need the correct information in clear language to realistically

understand the pros and cons of e-cigarettes. *AJPH*

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## BOSTEAN ET AL. RESPOND

We thank Bandara for his comments and interest in our study. We agree that regulations limiting adolescent access to e-cigarettes are necessary but insufficient to minimize adolescent use of e-cigarettes, as has been observed for combustible cigarettes.<sup>1</sup>

We also agree that it is additionally necessary to address adolescents' perception that e-cigarette use is safe<sup>2</sup>—especially as scientific evidence emerges that clarifies the health effects of e-cigarettes on adolescents (both nonsmokers and smokers), and whether e-cigarettes are effective cessation tools for adolescent cigarette smokers.

Other factors, such as lack of emotional support and adolescent rebelliousness also play an important part in adolescent substance use.<sup>3</sup> No single policy can prevent youths from becoming addicted to nicotine, but

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the history of tobacco control shows that cumulative policy protections collectively can have substantial impact on reducing youths' use of nicotine products and addiction to nicotine.<sup>4</sup> **AJPH**

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#### **CONTRIBUTORS**

G. Bostean, D. R. Trinidad and W. J. McCarthy all contributed to writing this response.

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