



FEATURES

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Key insights from the Malaysia Society for Harm Reduction Conference 2024

On 19 October 2024, the Malaysia Society for Harm Reduction (MSHR) hosted the 2024 Harm Reduction Conference titled 'New Innovations and Paradigms in Reducing Population Harm' at the Le Méridien Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The full-day multidisciplinary event convened experts to talk about the latest issues surrounding harm reduction, and how these can be effectively addressed through science, policymaking and action.

Featuring presentations and a panel discussion with renowned public health advocates (**Figure 1**), the session on tobacco harm reduction (THR) highlighted the following insights:

1. The deleterious health impacts of cigarette smoking may be reduced in smokers who completely switch to using tobacco heating products (THPs).^{1,2} A randomised controlled study (N=332) measured biomarkers of exposure (BoE) and biomarkers of potential harm (BoPH) related to oxidative stress, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and cancer. Results were measured up to 180 days in smokers who (1) continue smoking or (2) switched to THPs. BoE and BoPH levels remained stable for continuing smokers, while THP users experienced significant reductions in most biomarkers.^{1,2}
2. New Zealand has taken a progressive approach to THR, leading to a significant decline in smoking rates (6.8%). In contrast, Australia implements restrictive policies for reduced-risk products (RRPs) and has a daily smoking rate of >8%. This situation underscores the urgent need for risk-proportionate regulations and government-supported THR initiatives.³
3. Recent updates on the Malaysian tobacco control law took effect on 1 October 2024. Key revisions include prohibiting the promotion of vapes as smoking cessation tools and limiting their nicotine content to 20 mg/mL – the latter of which poses a significant challenge for smokers who may need higher nicotine levels to successfully quit smoking.^{4,5}
4. The advancement of THR within Southeast Asia remains hampered due to prevalent misinformation, limited scientific capacity to review evidence, and an ideological disconnect between the harm reduction and tobacco control communities.¹ These barriers can be addressed by establishing dialogue platforms across the region, propagating nuanced THR communication through appropriate channels (e.g., television, news and social media), and mobilising grassroots consumers.⁶



Figure 1. Expert faculty members and influential advocates during the 2024 MSHR Conference Session 1: Comprehensive Approaches to Mitigating Harm from Tobacco. (Left to Right) Prof. Tikki Pangestu, Asst. Prof. Jay Jazul, Prof. Marewa Glover, Dr. Hiroya Kumamaru, Prof. Mohamad Hussain Habil, Prof. Dr. Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh, Prof. Dr. Rohan Sequeira, Mr. Tarmizi Anuwar and Prof. Kai-Jen Chuang. **Image credits:** Official event photographer.



The role of consumers and advocacy groups in advancing THR: An interview with Nancy Loucas of CAPHRA



I believe that the successes of THR in the Asia Pacific region are the product of collaborative effort. We [consumers] are the evidence that the products work. THR-friendly medical professionals and researchers provide the scientific evidence that those who have made the switch have improved their health. Some government officials acknowledge that they work for the people and that their mandate is the health of the public as a whole. To make collaboration work, everyone needs to approach the issue from a common ground – our common humanity – and work towards the goal of eradicating the harms from unsafe tobacco products.



Nancy Loucas

Executive Coordinator, CAPHRA

What is CAPHRA and what are some of its key initiatives?

The Coalition of Asia Pacific Tobacco Harm Reduction Advocates (CAPHRA) is a grassroots coalition of 11 consumer advocacy organisations throughout the Asia Pacific region. Our goal is to educate, inform and advocate for the right of adults to make informed choices about their health and to have access to products that enable them to successfully quit smoking and other unsafe oral tobacco products.

Our collective mission is advocacy in our respective countries through scientific exchange and submission-drafting for policy and regulation in support of one another. We believe in evidence-based policy, not policy-based evidence.

How did you get into the THR space?

Back in 2016, I founded the Aotearoa Vapers Community Advocacy (AVCA NZ) with four other vapers to fight against the Wellington City Council that wanted to include vaping in the smokefree by-laws. As you would find with many advocates in this space, I lost family members far too soon. My mother and both my grandfathers died from smoking-related disease because the conventional “quit or die” methods didn’t assist in quitting.

My passion for THR comes from being able to find something to help me get off combustible tobacco, so my children don’t suffer like my brother and I did with a very ill mother for the last 11 years of

her life. I was also raised to fight against social injustice, and to help other people (i.e., the collective over the individual). Health is a human right – one that many don’t realise is priceless until they get ill.

Do you know of any specific instances where consumers’ voices made a significant impact on THR-related matters?

In the Philippines and New Zealand, consumers were involved in the development of the first set of regulations that legalised vaping products as consumer products.

In Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, consumer advocates are working with their governments to formulate risk-proportionate regulations that allow adults access and choice.

In Mongolia, advocates are also working with the government to educate them about RRP and how best to approach regulations on these products without implementing wholesale bans.

What were some of the challenges you faced in advocating for THR?

From the WHO FCTC down to local government tobacco control and public health, safer nicotine products are seen as a threat to the status quo on many levels – mostly based on fear and ego.

Consumers who advocate for choice and access are vilified, dehumanised and not taken seriously, rather being

labeled as “big tobacco”.

Most of the negative experiences are from a refusal to see us as people with lived experiences and a desire to help others, but instead a choice to see us as bots or paid shells of big corporates, which none of us are.

What will be your message for individuals who remain skeptical about THR?

Fear of change is a normal human emotion, but one must educate oneself, not by listening to mainstream or social media, but by approaching with an open mind and by understanding that harm reduction is actually something one practices in daily life without a second thought (e.g., seat belts, non-alcoholic beverages, helmets).

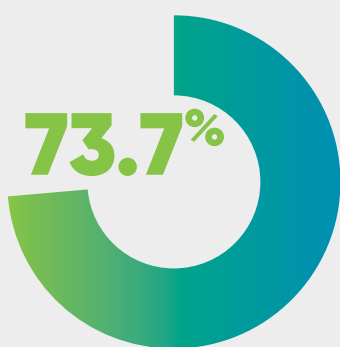
Begin advocating for THR by reaching out to your respective local advocacy groups:

- Asia Pacific: CAPHRA (caphraorg@gmail.com)
- Europe: ETHRA (europethra@gmail.com)
- Latin America: ARDT IberoAmerica (info@ardtiberioamerica.org)
- USA: CASAA (info@casaa.org)
- Canada: Rights4Vapers (info@rights4vapers.com)

Understanding THR communication barriers for young health professionals in Africa

Media campaigns are one of the most valuable tools to promote THR awareness among the youth. Strategic communication efforts that educate on THR, the dangers of tobacco use, and the relevance of smoking cessation techniques help widen perspectives and encourage advocacy against tobacco-related harms.⁷

A mixed-methods study in Nigeria aimed to assess the knowledge and perceptions of young public health advocates, healthcare students and budding journalists on smoking cessation and THR. Using a Google Forms survey, comprising close- and open-ended questions, 415 individuals participated in the study, responding to queries pertaining to their knowledge of THR, RRP and smoking cessation techniques. The authors summarised the study findings as follows (Figure 2).⁷



lacked prior knowledge or understanding of THR
(N=415)



agreed that RRP aid in smoking cessation (n=120)*



regarded nicotine replacement therapy as the most effective THR strategy (n=120)*

More advocacy and sensitisation programs

should be organised to raise THR awareness

Ambassadorial roles for public university students

should be created to further propagate the central message of THR

Figure 2. Quantitative and qualitative summary of results of a study of young health professionals in Nigeria. Data sourced from Oke G, et al. *Discov Psychol* 2024;4:6.⁷

*A more in-depth questionnaire was administered for 120 participants selected for the THRJourno project. The selection criteria for the 120 participants were determined by both their enthusiastic responses to the application questions and specific demographic criteria (aged 18 to 40 and educational background in fields such as emerging journalist, health communicator, young professional in health and public health, students in media-related disciplines, public health advocates, and content creators, as well as health writers).⁷

Several barriers to effective THR communication were also identified in the study, including misinformation by health professionals and the media, religious and cultural constraints, and challenges in reaching remote areas. Meanwhile, increased advocacy and communication, government engagement and policy development, simplification of THR messages, and capacity-building and engagement of advocates and stakeholders, emerged as the key strategies to enhance THR communication in Africa.

Learn more by reading the full article here:

[Knowledge, perception, and willingness of emerging Public Health Advocates to effectively communicate about smoking cessation and Tobacco Harm Reduction in Africa](#)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Although there exists a wealth of evidence demonstrating the positive impact of RRP and progressive policies on THR advancement, several roadblocks persist in certain countries, such as Australia and Malaysia, highlighting the urgent need for data-driven dialogue and advocacy.¹⁻⁶
- Effective collaboration among stakeholders, including consumer groups, is essential for advancing THR. This collective effort ensures that the consumer voice is central to discussions aimed at eradicating the harms associated with combustible tobacco products.
- The results of the study on THR communication barriers in Africa highlights the importance of (1) effectively disseminating appropriate information about THR strategies to the public and (2) leveraging the potential and expertise of young health professionals and other key stakeholders to reduce the harmful effects of smoking.⁷

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The EATHR is a dynamic and knowledgeable group of experts from across the Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa regions who are committed to educating, advocating, and representing the rights of adult alternative nicotine consumers.

Organised in collaboration with:

