

January 21, 2021

Testimony of Dr. Enid R. Neptune in support of SB177

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the American Thoracic Society having served as a recent Vice-Chair of the Tobacco Action Committee of the American Thoracic Society. I am a pulmonologist at Johns Hopkins. A large proportion of the patients I see in clinic suffer from cigarette smoke related lung diseases, especially chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung cancer. I understand both the biology of cigarette smoke induced injury and the clinical consequences of tobacco exposure allowing me to speak on the merits of the Senate bill 177 to prohibit flavored tobacco products. First, I would like to state that the debate on flavored tobacco cigarettes is over. They cause harm to our young people, our communities of color and to our economy. They have no role in smoking cessation. They provide no benefit from a public health or a clinical posture.

When I care for COPD patients who require supplemental oxygen tanks to breathe and are unable to have a retirement experience that their years in the workforce merit, I harken back to their initial experiences with tobacco. They invariably recount initiation at the age of 12, 14 or later teen years. As several speakers have mentioned, the initiation of tobacco use is intimately tied to the availability of flavored tobacco products. Seven out of 10 middle school students who currently use tobacco have used a flavored product. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of young people who have ever used tobacco started with a flavored product. As many have quipped, “a spoonful of sugar helps the nicotine go down”.

What is the clinical data? The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) has concluded that youth use of tobacco in any form, including e-cigarettes, is unsafe, causes addiction, and can harm adolescent brain development, impacting attention, memory, impulse control, mood, and learning. A recent Stanford University School of Medicine [study](#) found that young people who vaped were five to seven times more likely to be infected by COVID-19 than those who did not use e-cigarettes.

A few years ago, the tobacco product manufacturers would argue that the use of noncombustible tobacco products could serve a role as harm reducers if they replaced or prevented the initiation of conventional cigarettes. We now know that this is not the case. E-cigarettes are extremely popular with youth and young adults and are often used in combination with combustible cigarettes. From 2017 to 2019, e-cigarette use

among high school students more than doubled to 27.5%. One in four Maryland high school students currently use e-cigarettes — a rate five times higher than adults.

Some have also argued that prohibiting the sale of flavored tobacco products would hurt the state economy. That is also not true. Today 7,500 Marylanders die each year from tobacco-related causes, costing Marylanders \$2.7 billion in healthcare every year, far exceeding any tax revenues we gain from their sale.

And it's not just kids. As an African-American woman, the issue of menthol additives is particularly offensive. Menthol is not just a flavoring; it is also a drug that acts on lung cells to reduce the irritative effects of smoking. This Menthol drug also increases the addictiveness of nicotine and reduces a smoker's ability to stop smoking. Since the 1960s, tobacco companies have aggressively targeted the Black community with their menthol flavored products, leading to a devastating and unequal burden of death and disease. In the 1950s, less than 10% of Black smokers used menthol cigarettes. Today, about 85% of Black smokers smoke menthols. Black men are more likely to be diagnosed with and die of lung cancer than any other demographic group in Maryland and suffer heart disease at a rate 56 percent higher than white Marylanders. Regulating menthol is not just a public health issue; it is also a social justice issue.

The American Thoracic Society appreciates the legislators who support this bill and ask for adoption of Senate Bill SB177 in an effort to save the lives of Marylanders. We also ask for the implementation of effective enforcement provisions. I strongly urge Maryland to take advantage of this important opportunity to protect its most vulnerable residents – and to serve as a model for other states in the US by becoming the sixth state to ban flavored tobacco products.