

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS), in partnership with Scottish Government and NHS Boards, plans to implement a comprehensive smoke-free prisons policy within 5 years. As part of their implementation process and informed by the principle of harm minimisation, the SPS is scoping the feasibility of introducing first generation e-cigarettes for sale in prison 'shops' (also referred to as the prison Canteen system). Scottish Directors of Public Health and NHS Health Scotland have been asked to comment on this approach from a population health perspective.

Background

Although the evidence on e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid is still emerging¹ we know that an increasing proportion of people are using them to try to quit smoking tobacco. Our current Scottish position statements on e-cigarettes^{2,3} recommended a pragmatic approach be taken to e-cigarettes when supporting those attending smoking cessation services – i.e. that people wishing to quit should be provided with information about the various available options and their effectiveness, and supported to quit using their preferred approach.

Current situation in prisons with regards smoking and e-cigarettes

The last Scottish prison survey revealed that 72% of respondents in custody currently smoke⁴, 56% of whom expressed a desire to stop and 66% stated they would use e-cigarettes if they were available in prisons instead of smoking tobacco. As smoking will lead to the deaths of over half of those who are addicted to tobacco, this remains a matter of prime concern for prisoner health and wellbeing. Also, second hand smoke presents a hazard to the health of staff, visitors and prisoners.

The NHS offers pharmacotherapy with counselling in prisons, the combination of which maximises the likelihood of quitting. Pharmacotherapy suitable for use in prison settings includes 'clean' nicotine in the form of patches, lozenges, sublingual tablets, inhalators, oral strips, oral and nasal sprays, and other non-nicotine products in tablet form (Bupropion, Varenicline) that replace or adjust the addictive response to withdrawal from nicotine. These products are available on prescription, and several nicotine products could also be available for purchase if the 'Canteen' system would allow that. At this time e-cigarettes are not available in prisons.

The recent Specification for National Prison Smoking Cessation Services in Scotland⁵ reinforces the need for an equitable, consistent and person-centred smoking cessation service to be available for all prisoners who wish to stop smoking.

Are there concerns about exposure to second hand vapour from e-cigarettes?

- There is consistent evidence that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful than smoking tobacco but are not risk free.
- Toxin levels from e-cigarette vapour are unlikely to exceed occupational exposure limits in all realistic scenarios. Nevertheless, the long-term toxicity of e-cigarette vapour is poorly understood and exposure has the potential to lead to adverse health effects in those with pre-existing respiratory conditions.

Recommendations

- In keeping with the pragmatic approach taken in the wider community in Scotland, we support the introduction of e-cigarettes for sale in prison shops as part of the implementation of smoke free Scottish prisons.
- Wherever feasible, any plans to implement such a policy should take reasonable measures to minimise exposure to second hand vapour.

¹ World Health Organization (2016) online: http://www.who.int/fctc/cop/cop7/FCTC_COP_7_11_EN.pdf?ua=1&ua=1

² Scottish Directors of Public Health and Scottish Health Promotion Managers (2015) online: http://www.scotphn.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2015_12_07-Final-Confirmed-e-cig-Joint-Position-Statement-SDSPHSHPMs.docx

³ NHS Health Scotland (2015) online: <http://www.healthscotland.com/documents/24383.aspx>

⁴ Scottish Prison Service (2015) online: <http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Publication-3895.aspx>

⁵ Health Scotland (2016) online: <http://www.healthscotland.com/documents/25618.aspx>