

SMOKE ALARM

Vaping crisis calls for immediate action

By Robert C. Garrett





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Let's Put the Vaping Crisis at the Top of the Agenda

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The image on Twitter is graphic and disturbing: an otherwise healthy 17-year-old is in a hospital bed on a ventilator, his lungs failing from vaping, something he has done since 8th grade.

Another teen told CNN this week that his physician delivered grim news: the boy, a varsity wrestler, has lungs like those of a 70-year-old. He vaped for two years and may never return to the mat.

As a father and health care executive for 35 years, I am alarmed by this crisis on so many fronts: hundreds hospitalized with mysterious lung illnesses across the country; several deaths possibly linked to vaping; an epidemic of adolescents using e-cigarettes and the unnerving reality that even our top health experts can't fully explain the scope or cause of this threat.

I am calling on all health networks in New Jersey to put this crisis at the top of their agenda. At Hackensack Meridian Health, we are gathering nurses, medical students and public health experts to launch an aggressive education campaign, especially for adolescents.

We are training 50 nurses who will educate students in 100 schools about the potential catastrophic outcomes from vaping. A team of students from the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine at Seton Hall University is getting involved too. Working with an adolescent psychologist, they developed an entire program to educate young people, a community health project launched at the request of leaders in Nutley who identified vaping as their biggest public health concern. Our Emergency Room teams are closely monitoring the situation, alarmed at how quickly this problem has become a public health crisis. Our 17-hospital network has treated a handful of patients with acute lung illness who reported vaping, including a man in his 40's who was put on a ventilator.

Even stoic veteran emergency physicians are unsettled by what is unfolding across the country.

"Young people are going from the soccer field and into the ICU and they're not leaving the hospital for a while," one of our Emergency Department chiefs said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the FDA and many state regulators are investigating the outbreak including those in New Jersey. Gov. Murphy has announced an executive order establishing an electronic smoking device task force. In the state Legislature, there is a proposal to ban all vaping products, one of the most sweeping initiatives in our nation.

While scientific experts, regulators and lawmakers commit to understanding what's causing so much illness and work to prevent it, we can all commit to educating our communities, especially our children who are woefully uninformed.

Here's what is so troubling to me, and why our network decided to launch a major public health campaign.

In 2018, the National Youth Tobacco Survey reported a 78 percent increase in high school students who reported using e-cigarettes in just a year. Today, one-quarter of high school students said they have used e-cigarettes, the federal government reported last week.

Among middle school students there was nearly a 50 percent increase in the number who reported vaping in a year.

And here's more disturbing data: two-thirds of adolescents who vape believe they are only inhaling flavors—not nicotine or anything potentially dangerous, the federal government reports.

Additionally, there is widespread marketing for the products which, as we remember from the days of Camel Joe, the hip but controversial mascot for Camel cigarettes, can have a major impact on young people. So, we have the perfect storm – a staggering lack of awareness of potential harm and constant ads hyping these products.

Clearly, we have our work cut out for us. I was heartened to hear this week that the FDA will develop guidelines to remove from the market all e-cigarette flavors except tobacco.

There's another layer to this epidemic that is disheartening. After making impressive

strides in reducing teen smoking, there's a dramatic resurgence in the number of youth who report using tobacco.

While vaping has been pitched as a tool to help adults quit smoking, federal data show that adolescents are more likely to start smoking if they have vaped.

As a father, I know teens consider themselves invincible. We have all educated our children about the dangers of experimenting with drugs and alcohol and the countless other ways they can fall into harm's way.

We must take the same approach with vaping and let them know they really ARE playing with fire if they smoke e-cigarettes. We are only now starting to understand the potential risk and how it may impact people in the most dire ways.

I want to share with you this commentary from one of our nation's preeminent health experts.

Dr. Ned Sharples, former Director of the National Cancer Institute was frequently asked "What topic in cancer research and cancer care keeps you up at night?"

Dr. Sharples, now acting FDA Commissioner, always gave the same response: tobacco control in the era of e-cigarettes.

We know the power of educating the public on the perils of smoking, opioid use, drunken driving and a host of other vital issues.

Consider how dramatically we are working to address the opioid crisis, which is contributing to a decrease in life expectancy in the US that our parents never could have imagined. But prescribing patterns are changing. Patients are more knowledgeable and asking hard questions about pain medication. Many of our surgeons have even changed pain management for patients during and after surgery, which is leading to faster recoveries and less time in the hospital. Our emergency room teams are also treating with non-addictive pain relief.

Additionally, we've seen a dramatic decrease in deaths from drunk driving. Alcohol-impaired driving fatalities fell by 65 percent between 1982 and 2015.

I am optimistic that we can marshal the same passion, commitment and determination to produce winning results when it comes to the vaping epidemic.