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SRI LANKA MEDICAL ASSOCIATION QUARTERLY

Availability and Accessibility of Electronic Cigarettes and Smokeless Tobacco Products in Colombo City

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Introduction and Objectives: Under the Prohibited Tobacco Products Regulations (2016) of the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) Act, smokeless tobacco products, flavoured or sweetened tobacco, and electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) containing tobacco are banned from manufacture, import, and sale in Sri Lanka. Despite this, such products remain available, highlighting gaps in enforcement. This study aimed to assess the availability and accessibility of e-cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products in Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) areas.

Methods: A mixed-method study combining cross-sectional and participatory observational study designs was conducted covering retail stores within 100m radius of purposively selected 245 key public places (central train and bus stations, schools, religious places) across the 15 CMC areas. Trained data collectors using mystery shopper methodology, inquired from shops about the availability of e-cigarettes, smokeless, flavoured and sweetened tobacco products. Available samples were purposively selected and purchased to assess the accessibility. Observations were documented on onsite promotions and industry tactics to evade current regulations.

Results: A total of 72.23km distance was covered in the survey. Of 1067 shops visited, six sold e-cigarettes (0.56%). Smokeless tobacco products (commonly in the form of betel quid) were widely available (n=170, 15.9%). Six shops (0.56%) sold tobacco-scented perfumes. All the shops selling Smokeless tobacco products and tobacco-scented perfumes (n=176, 16.5%) had point-of-sale promotions.

Conclusions: E-cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products remain accessible within CMC areas alongside widespread point-of-sale promotions and tobacco industry interference. Retail licencing, strengthening enforcement of current laws and monitoring mechanisms are essential to protect public health.