

Health Bureau responds to inaccurate media report on waterpipe tobacco

In response to a local media report today (January 28) that the Government is considering a ban on waterpipe tobacco and that the measure will dampen the desire of tourists from the Middle East to visit Hong Kong, a spokesman for the Health Bureau (HBB) reiterated that the Government has proposed to prohibit, by legislation, flavours in conventional smoking products including waterpipe tobacco, rather than banning waterpipe tobacco itself. Tobacco control is a major public health issue. The HBB expresses regret over the inaccurate information, which is misleading to citizens and tourists, disseminated by certain media and individuals.

The HBB put forward proposals for tobacco control measures in June last year, including, among others, the proposal to prohibit flavours in conventional smoking products (including waterpipe tobacco) as defined under the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371), and did not propose to ban all kinds of waterpipe tobacco. In response to a question raised by a Legislative Council Member at the Legislative Council meeting on July 3 last year, the HBB has once again clearly pointed out that the proposal to prohibit adding flavours (such as fruit flavours) in conventional smoking products seeks to counteract the intention of tobacco companies to use flavouring agents to disguise the hazards of tobacco products and attract people to smoke. The Government also observed that the use of flavoured waterpipe tobacco has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. In order to prevent tobacco companies to use waterpipe smoking as another means to entice members of the public, in particular women and young people, to become addicted to smoking, the Government's proposal to ban flavours in conventional smoking products will also apply to waterpipe tobacco.

Waterpipe is a smoking device originating from regions including the Middle East, and traditionally is used without added flavour. In order to entice people to smoke, tobacco companies add flavours to waterpipe tobacco and this has led to the growing popularity of waterpipes in other regions as well. In addition, Islam is widely followed in the Middle East, and alcohol consumption or bar patronage is not prevalent. As venues offering outdoor waterpipes in Hong Kong are mostly bars, the ban on adding flavours in waterpipe tobacco will have limited impact on the experience of Muslim tourists visiting Hong Kong. In fact, more progressive measures in other regions have been implemented. For example, Singapore banned the import and sale of all waterpipes in 2016, and publicly available information shows that the number of tourists from the Middle East (including Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) arriving in Singapore before and after the ban came into effect remain comparable.

Under the Ordinance, conducting a smoking act in a statutory no smoking area (such as indoor areas of bars) is prohibited. Any person engaged in a smoking act in statutory no smoking areas commits an offence and is liable to a fixed penalty of \$1,500. Currently, only about 10 per cent of bars in Hong

Kong have outdoor areas where waterpipe tobacco may be smoked legally. The Government will consider introducing a grace period when formulating the new legislation to allow time for the public and the bar sector to make adjustments.

Moreover, where smoking products (including waterpipe tobacco) are sold, in bars or other premises, the restrictions on the promotion and sale of smoking products stipulated in the Ordinance apply. Offenders are liable on summary conviction to a maximum fine of \$50,000. Venue managers of statutory no smoking areas are empowered by the Ordinance to request a smoking offender cease the smoking act; if the offender is not co-operative, the manager may contact the Police for assistance. The spokesman appeals to operators and venue managers of bars/restaurants not to assist any person in breaching the statutory smoking prohibitions, or provide a waterpipe apparatus and tobacco to customers for use in statutory no-smoking areas. The Department of Health will continue to closely monitor and take stringent enforcement actions to tackle illegal waterpipe smoking activities.