

A Tale of Two Countries: Tackling Tobacco across the Tasman

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New Zealand and Australia have led the world with progressive tobacco control policies for many years. Both countries have seen positive results, with marked declines in smoking prevalence overall. But not all population groups have experienced the rates of decline and flow-on health benefits equally. In New Zealand, Māori smoking prevalence has fallen yearly for over a decade but remains more than double that of non-Māori. This persisting inequity - a breach of the New Zealand government's obligations to Māori to achieve equal health outcomes - underpins a new and radical divergence in tackling tobacco between our two countries.

While Australia has adopted a business-as-usual approach, New Zealand's Tobacco Control Action Plan for a Smokefree Aotearoa by the year 2025, supported by the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Act passed in December 2022, outlines a radical legislative agenda: from 1st July 2024 there will be a marked reduction in the number of retailers able to sell smoked tobacco products; from 1st April 2025 the nicotine content of tobacco products must be reduced to 0.8mg/g of tobacco, effectively to non-addictive levels; and from 1st January 2027, the sale of smoked tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 will be prohibited.

Greater investment in Māori tobacco control leadership and ramped-up smoking cessation support in the communities with the highest smoking prevalence will support these strategies. But one other approach diverges dramatically from Australia's current direction: in New Zealand, vaping products are regulated as consumer products, are widely available and vaping is actively promoted by the government as an evidence-based quit-smoking strategy.

My presentation explores the divergence in approaches between our countries and outlines the rationale behind New Zealand's radical Action Plan. I will also argue that vaping is vital to the success of New Zealand's strategy.