



Kids Health Matters Transcript

Episode 2: The rise and harm of vaping and why it's cool to quit

The Child and Adolescent Health Services respects and acknowledges the Whadjuk People as the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and of Elders past and present.

Hi and welcome to Kids Health Matters - a podcast where we meet experts from the Western Australian Child and Adolescent Health Service, which includes Perth Children's Hospital.

Each episode will dive into a range of topics and issues affecting kids' health and wellbeing and provide you with information on how you can best support them through their journey of childhood and adolescence.

Host Dani Shuey (DS)

My name is Dani Shuey and it's my pleasure to be your host today to discuss what might be one of the more pressing topics on Kids Health Matters.

We know the number of young people vaping in Australia is alarming and has been increasing over recent years. We also know that health and education authorities have been working hard to tackle vaping use amongst young people because of increasing concern about the unknown long-term health impacts of vaping.

With the help of our two guests who bring different perspectives to the discussion, today we will explore vaping use amongst young people and what to do if you have concerns.

Welcome to Kellie who is a community health nurse covering both school health and child health and my co-host, as always, the respiratory and sleep doctor at Perth Children's Hospital, Dr. Adelaide Withers. Hello, ladies.

I'm excited to get onto this topic today because it's one that's talked about a lot and is very prevalent and I think we're going to get some really interesting insights into it today.

So Kellie, if you don't mind starting us off, tell us a bit about your role as a school health nurse.

Guest Kellie (K)

I'm employed by the Child and Adolescent Health Service and I'm hosted by the Education Department in a local high school where we provide a service for students to drop in before and



after school and during recess and lunch breaks. We follow a variety of guidelines to help guide the students to be autonomous and independent around their health care needs.

The bulk of our work is doing one-to-one sessions but we also respond to students' requests and individual requests from teachers and the school to present in classrooms on different health topics.

DS

What are those health topics?

K

Sometimes it could be vaping which is the big topic at the moment and I'm doing two talks tomorrow. We also talk about biological changes to the body during puberty, healthy relationships, consensual relationships, mental health, self-care, leavers talks: anything that's prevalent to the age of the young person at that time.

DS

So, there's a lot that school health nurses like yourself can help with inside the classroom settings but I want to talk about vaping in particular, because that's what today's topic is. So what trend are you seeing amongst students?

K

There has definitely been an increase in vaping over the past two to three years. A couple of years ago I was asked to deliver a talk to a year 11 year 12 cohort and we were starting to see the emergence of vaping there. Now when I see students, they're actually in the younger age groups and the older age groups seem to have dropped off on the vaping radar a bit. I don't know if that's because developmentally at their age risk-taking behaviour decreases or whether they're just smarter, savvy - I really can't be sure on that.

DS

It's scary to think how young some kids now vaping are. From your perspective how much of a problem is vaping?



K

It has become a big problem and we are now seeing some students who are coming from primary school having already vaped.

When we talk to high school and primary school nurses throughout the region vaping is a topic that comes up across the spectrum. For me as a high school nurse, the biggest problem is the addictive aspect of vaping and the really high concentrations of the nicotine in these vapes.

Yesterday, I saw a young person who described to me a series of events where he started vaping, once just as a trial, then he tried it again with his mates and now he can't even get through the school day without vaping. So for me it definitely that. The Education Department has been amazing in helping young people in schools tackle vaping. Some schools are trialling vaping detectors that students are aware of and they say that has actually helped curb some of the issues. And I think the teachers are amazing, they are always trying to educate young people on current issues in the classroom, whether it's during maths, English or science or any topic. So there has been a real drive to tackle vaping from a curricular perspective and from a behavioural change perspective.

DS

Adelaide no doubt in your work as a respiratory clinician at Perth Children's Hospital, you really are seeing vaping as a problem for your patients.

Co-host Dr Adelaide Withers (AW)

Absolutely. I really worry about the effects of vaping on my patients and I was really blown away when I read some statistics recently that showed 14% of 12- to 17-year-olds have actually tried vaping at least twice, and for the 18 to 24 year olds its 26%, and of those who are regular smokers, almost 70% used vapes daily; I was literally blown away by that - no pun intended.

We really worry about the effects of vaping, not just in children with respiratory problems, but in healthy kids too. It can cause problems similar to asthma, even up to really severe and fatal lung injuries. For kids who already have respiratory problems like asthma or cystic fibrosis, their symptoms will worsen dramatically if they try vaping. Vaping has a really negative impact on a young person's ability to exercise and we really worry about the long-term impacts because they're their lungs are still growing. That's the time when they get peak lung capacity so vaping can really impact that.



A lot of people seem to think it's safer than smoking - it's definitely not. It can cause really severe irreversible lung damage and there's now even a name - it's called vappy or evali; e-cigarette vape-induced lung injury.

DS

Gosh, it seems like vaping's been around for two to three years and we're still in the very early stages of finding a solution, I guess. I know there's a lot of work being done but there's still a long way to go in educating young people, as well as parents and caregivers who take care of these kids.

Kellie, from your experience, which age group is most at risk?

K

Currently the age group we worry about most is the year nine cohort; so that's the 14 and 15-year-olds. In this age group it fits in with their developmental ages and stages of increased risk-taking behaviour. They're trying to get some independence from their parents, and often kids of this age are a little bit bored at school, so they're not as engaged. They're probably dropping out a sport, they've got more free time getting to and from school.

DS

There's a heap of other distractions at the age of 14. I remember as a 14-year-old myself, and you're not interested, there were some kids that were but I remember being that kid who just lost interest in the classroom and I wasn't focused.

K

Yes, and I think it's important to remember that when we engage with young people that this isn't them being naughty; this fits in with their developmental age and stage. So year 10 and year 9, definitely are the biggest cohort. Some year 10s and as I said, kids going into years 11, and 12, maybe some kids have more goals and more direction towards university or post-high school life. Previously, I would have talked to the year 9 and 10 age groups about healthy relationships, cannabis use, alcohol use and probably cigarettes. But definitely in the last two to three years, we have started introducing vaping into those conversations.

So, what we do know is that implementing good brief interventions or harm minimisations and presenting really good health education can be really effective in stopping young people from engaging in vaping to start with.



DS

So Adelaide, would you say that's reflected in what you're seeing in the PCH clinics?

AW

Absolutely. It's now standard practice for us to ask all teenagers about vaping as well as cigarette smoking and other drug or alcohol use and we're also noticing the health impacts of vaping on younger patients. We also worry about parents who vape around their children. And as Kellie said, this is a developmental stage where young people are risk-taking; they're starting to explore other things; they're finding who they are and often it's because of the influence of their friends. It's really important to be doing what your friends are doing when you're 14 or 15 so that's a group we really worry about.

DS

So say I'm a parent with a teenager, I've sent them to school and I'm worried about their vaping. What advice are they being given directly from the school Kellie?

K

In my experience, what I've often found is that parents are unaware their children are vaping so I guess with the rollout of these smoke detectors, we are coming across more and more students who are vaping at school and cannot get through the school day without it.

In my experience what I have found that it's often us making contact with the parents to let them know that their child is vaping. When parents are informed about that they are always very supportive. Probably a few years ago they would have been as Adelaide said, oh it's just vaping, it's not an issue etc.

But now that there's more health information available parents are becoming more aware. Students are becoming more aware and everyone's better educated and so those students who are vaping are really getting worried about it and their parents are getting worried too.

It really depends on the advice for a particular situation in my job. If I'm doing a classroom health education setting, that would be in tune with the age of those children. So if it's for year sevens, the information will be age appropriate. For years 11, and 12, I might start talking about vaping, going off to leavers, that sort of thing. We definitely follow a prevention education framework trying to prevent the vaping from happening first, which is why we have started talking about vaping in year seven.



And obviously, as we go forward, those conversations and our health promotion and health education strategies change. On a one-to-one basis if a child is in my health centre, then I would try to find out what's happening for that young person as a whole, as a holistic assessment, because often, if a young person is engaging in vaping, or other risk taking behaviours, there's much more going on for that young person at home, whether it's socially, emotionally, mentally, physically, and sometimes engaging in risky behaviour is a way to control a situation that's happening at home. So it really depends on what's happening.

As I said, before, we work on a harm minimisation strategy so if they are already vaping, and are engaged in risky vaping behaviours multiple times a day, we will work with them to try and get them to quit, try to increase the times between vaping; those sorts of things - a lot of education and strategies for quitting.

DS

There's a vaping toolkit that I heard you talk about as well. So what is that?

K

The vaping toolkit has been implemented by the Education Department for teachers, parents, students and other healthcare professionals. It's a package that has been prepared together with the Department of Health and it contains amazing facts and resources for a variety of people in a variety of different settings to help either their child, their students or young people in general.

DS

When should a parent become concerned if they suspect your child might be vaping?

K

When I speak to parents often they are unaware their child is vaping because sometimes the devices are so small they can hide them and it also doesn't smell like traditional nicotine. When I speak to a young person they do say it does have a funny sweet smell but that's what they like about it.

When I'm talking with parents, they are often completely unaware because they thought they would be able to find it, smell it and be one step ahead. So I guess it's about once having identified the young people having conversations with them about why they're doing it, how they can stop and what else is going on for them.



DS

And on the marketing side of vaping, Adelaide, we were having a great chat off air about the marketing techniques used by vaping companies.

AW

One of the things that really worries me about vapes is that their marketing techniques are directed at teenagers at this really vulnerable period of their lives. They want to be like their friends, they want to be like celebrities.

The companies use things like flavours, which have been shown to be specifically chosen to appeal to teenagers - things like cinnamon and cool mint. And a lot of the devices look like USB pens; they look pretty cool. There's lots of pictures of celebrities using their e-cigarette devices so I find it really sad actually that they're specifically targeting young people with all these strategies and parents need to be aware of that.

One of the other things that really concerns me about vapes is they have a really high nicotine content in them and nicotine is actually one of the most addictive substances known to man. A lot of vape products will contain somewhere between two and up to five times the amount of concentrated nicotine compared to one cigarette.

DS

That is interesting, and you would get this Kellie, there's a lot of misinformed young people who think, oh, vapes are better for you than cigarettes.

K

Yes, often young people say to me initially that they're vaping because it's nicotine free. And when you discuss vapes them, they're actually they don't know what's in them, and that they contain nicotine and these are some of the doses, then they get frightened, and their parents get frightened.

DS

And the side effects too I imagine.



AW

Absolutely, so as well as being incredibly addictive, nicotine has been shown to have a negative impact on people's mental health. It can cause things like shaking, nausea and vomiting, and one of the other worrying things is that the concentrated forms of nicotine are actually incredibly toxic. So there have been cases of children getting severe nicotine poisoning from getting into mum and dad's vapes. The amount of nicotine in e-cigarettes is actually incredibly dangerous.

DS

If parents are worried about it Kellie, how should parents discuss vaping with their children?

K

I think parents should discuss vaping in the same way as they do with any risky topics such as drugs, sex, and alcohol. We start early and have conversations that are age appropriate to children at the time. And then as the young people get older, through to adolescence and young adulthood, those conversations should become more informed with the young person, appropriate to their age. The biggest thing that parents need to be aware of is they need to be well informed themselves, they need all the information that Adelaide's talking about.

There is so much information available now that's evidence-based and research-based that parents would be able to get their hands on. Like the vaping toolkit. So I believe the most important thing is be informed, be aware and start having those conversations early, as you would with any other health topic.

AW

And I might also jump in there with some tips for parents.

When you're having these conversations with your teenagers, I have found it makes it easier if you can normalise the conversation a bit and maybe start by talking about other people first. So you might want to start a conversation by saying, I heard that a lot of high school kids are vaping – 'do you know anyone who vapes in your school?' Then you can move on to 'are any of your friends into vaping?' Rather than actually asking your young person 'have you tried to vape?' It's often a lot easier to get them to open up by talking about other people first, and not actually having that conversation about them directly.



DS

Adelaide, there's a lot of information and resources out there, but you can give us your top three, take out messages about vaping?

AW

Quite simply, vaping is not safe. We know vapes contain toxic chemicals that damage growing lungs and airways and actually contain things that cause cancer. Vape-induced lung injury can be irreversible and even fatal. So that's probably my biggest take home message - vaping is not safe.

Secondly, the amount of nicotine in vapes is concentrated and it's often very, very high and we know it's one of the most addictive substances on this planet.

And thirdly, vape manufacturers use strategies to really target teenagers, especially with things like the packaging and the flavours, so it's really important for parents to be aware and have these conversations with their kids.

DS

And Kellie, we've heard a lot from you today as well, but could you just give us some key messages to sum up the advice you'd give?

K

My best advice to parents is to get informed and contact their child's school nurse if they're at all concerned about their young person at school. If there's already a vaping issue going on with their young person, then contact your GP or contact your nurse.

There are amazing resources available such as Education Department's fact sheets. There's also Quitline and a number of other sites where you can get information from.

And my biggest message is, as I try to emphasize to every young person, if they make a mistake, it's okay. If they have been vaping, it's okay, we can help them quit and that doesn't identify them long into the future.

DS

It's always about being part of a crowd for teenagers isn't it and following along with others, so emphasizing the message that it's cool to quit, and we can do this together and we're informed



about the health side effects and make it okay to say no, I'm taking a stand here and I'm going to give up.

AW

Absolutely. It's really important that we keep young lungs healthy, and we can all work together to make sure that vapes aren't affecting that.

DS

Thanks for listening to Kids Health Matters - a podcast produced by the Child and Adolescent Health Service. You can find more information and links to useful resources in the show notes for each episode. You can also email us with any feedback at kidshealthmatters@health.wa.gov.au.

