

STORE OWNER WANTS TO SET RECORD STRAIGHT ON VAPING

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A north Halton retailer is trying to set the record straight on an industry he said he feels is misunderstood.

Karim Khwaja, CEO of Dragon Vapes, owns seven specialty vape stores across Canada, including two in Halton Region — in Georgetown and Milton.

Spurred by recent national media coverage, Khwaja said he feels youth uptake in vaping and deaths related to vaping have unfairly targeted specialty vape stores.

"Yes, people have died," Khwaja said, "and yes, there is an uptake in youth vaping."

But so far, the only reported deaths related to vape products are linked to illegal cannabis products that contain vitamin

E acetate.

"When vaped, it creates a layer of fat around your lungs," he said, adding that legally produced vapour products, however, are water-soluble unlike fats like vitamin E acetate.

Because of the alarming coverage, Khwaja said customers are returning to cigarettes.

"Health Canada says vaping is less harmful than smoking. Nobody in the industry is saying vaping isn't harmful," Khwaja said.

According to the Halton Region Health Department, no deaths or illnesses related to vaping have been reported.

In 2016, one in six adults smoked in Halton, and lung cancer was the second most commonly diagnosed cancer among men and women in living in the region. However, a growing

public health concern in the region is an increase in vaping among youths.

"Kids shouldn't be vaping, period," Khwaja said.

But Khwaja said he doesn't think specialty stores, like his, are to blame.

"I'll take my daughter into a gas station and right at the counter you'll see e-cigarettes," Khwaja said. "I smoked for 19 years. I bought all of my cigarettes at a gas station."

In 2018, the region conducted focus group with Halton youth regarding vaping. Youths reported feeling that vaping products were easily accessible in Halton from convenience stores, gas stations, and online.

While only three infractions were issued to gas stations in 2019 for sale to minors, one for tobacco and two for vape products, nine



Bryan Myers/Torstar

Karim Khwaja, CEO of Dragon Vapes, shows some of the labelling requirements for e-liquid products used in vapes.

infractions were issued to specialty vape shops.

"Vape shops are regulated by the provincial Smoke-Free Ontario Act (SFOA)," said Dr. Hamidah Meghani, medical officer of health and commissioner of the Halton Region Health Department. "In Halton Region, the SFOA is

enforced by public health inspectors."

While vaping product retailers are inspected annually, additional inspections may be done in response to complaints.

"Currently, there are no limitations to how close a vaping product retailer can be to a school," Meghani

said. "However, under the SFOA, vaping is prohibited in schools, on school grounds, and any public area within 20 metres of school grounds."

On Jan. 1, a ban on the promotion of vaping products in non-specialty retail stores came into effect.

"However, this restriction does not address the advertisement of vaping products in other public places, such as billboards and on public transit," Meghani said.

New regulations have been proposed at the federal level that would further restrict advertising but has yet to come into effect.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Following up with a resident from a local Facebook group, we took the concerns of vape product retailers to the health department.

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