



ROYAL
COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS
OF IRELAND

SUMMARY

Time for a Tobacco Free Future

Call for government action to
end tobacco harm in Ireland

RCPI CLINICAL ADVISORY GROUP ON SMOKING AND E-CIGARETTES
18 FEBRUARY 2026



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Foreword -“Ná caith tobac le do thoil”

As physicians, we see daily the impact that smoking continues to have on people's lives in Ireland. Despite decades of progress, tobacco use remains one of the leading causes of preventable illness and premature death.

In my own clinical practice in general and geriatric medicine, I see the consequences clearly. Premature illness and death, a chronic disease that might have been avoided, lung and other cancers that might not have happened, heart attacks and strokes that change the course of a life in an instant and frailty that develops faster and with greater severity because of years of tobacco exposure. These are not statistics; these are all people who have suffered a potentially preventable personal tragedy.

We also know, through high quality Irish research, including the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), that smoking profoundly affects people's ability to live well. It accelerates the progression of disease, reduces resilience, increases disability, and reduces quality of life. These impacts are not confined to older age; they are the cumulative result of smoking beginning early in life.

While it is never too late to stop smoking, it is far better not to have started in the first place. That is why protecting children and young people must be central to our national response. No young person should ever become part of the next generation of smokers. But do remember, it is never too late to stop smoking.

The concept of a Tobacco Free Generation reflects a clear and compelling ambition: to phase out the sale of tobacco products over time so that today's children grow up free from the harms that have shaped so many lives in past generations. This is one of the most powerful actions we can take to break the cycle of addiction and prevent future illness.

A Tobacco Free Future is achievable. Public support is strong, the evidence is clear, and the clinical community stands united in its call for action. This report offers a practical, ambitious roadmap to end the epidemic of tobacco-related harm, not simply to manage it.

The harms caused by smoking are preventable. The solutions are before us. What we need now is leadership and commitment to act.



*“Ná caith tobac
le do thoil”*

Dr Diarmuid O'Shea
President, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

RCPI Clinical Advisory Group on Smoking and E-Cigarettes

This group is comprised of representatives from RCPI's faculties and institutes, RCPI trainees, and invited experts from other relevant organisations. The group's main objectives are to make recommendations for national policy and legislation on smoking and e-cigarettes based on international best practice, highlighting new evidence in these areas and providing an expert clinical voice in public debate.

Membership of this group is detailed in the table:

Name	Representing
Dr Paul Kavanagh (Chair)	Faculty of Public Health Medicine
Prof Des Cox	Faculty of Paediatrics
Prof Breda Cushen	Institute of Medicine
Dr Sujil Jacob	Faculty of Occupational Medicine
Dr Eibhlín Healy	Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists
Dr Junaid Rasul	RCPI Trainee Committee nominee
Dr John Gannon	(Public Health Medicine- Higher Specialist Trainee) Member selected from open call
Dr Anne-Marie Sweeney	(Respiratory Medicine – Higher Specialist Trainee) Member selected from open call
Prof Paul Donnellan	Nominee Society for Medical Oncology
Prof Catríona Jennings	Nominee Irish Cardiac Society
Dr Helen McAvoy	All Island Institute of Public Health

Acknowledgements

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Thanks to Mairead Heffron and Niamh O'Sullivan in RCPI for their valuable advice and support to the development and publication of this position paper.

Citations are provided for resources used to inform and support this Position Statement. Resources developed by ASH (Action on Smoking & Health) for Project Sunset and its 2025 Global Tobacco Endgame Summit, which took place in Dublin in conjunction with the World Conference on Tobacco Control played a valuable role in the Position Statement.

THE IMPACT ON HEALTH

Over
4,500 deaths
each year from tobacco use, accounting for almost **1-in-6 deaths**

10 people every day
are diagnosed with **cancer caused by tobacco**

Smoking causes more harm than alcohol, drugs, and accidents **combined**

THE IMPACT OF SMOKING COMPARED TO COVID-19

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to end of 2022:

MORE DEATHS and HOSPITALISATIONS
from **smoking-related disease** than COVID-19.

THE LIFETIME ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT

5 Million
life-years lost

6 Million
years living with chronic disease

€20.2 Billion
in healthcare costs

THE IMPACT ON HOSPITALS

Almost
1,000
hospitalisations every week, accounting for

20% of all **respiratory** hospitalisations.
12% of all **cancer** hospitalisations.
10% of all **circulatory** hospitalisations.

THE SCALE OF INDUSTRY PROFITS

Over
100 Million
cigarette packs consumed annually

Revenue
€1.8 Billion
annually

THE SCALE OF TOBACCO PRODUCT ACCESS

12,500
outlets sell tobacco in Ireland.

This compares to **2,000** pharmacies, **2,500** GPs, **85** hospitals.

Executive summary

The clinical advisory group on smoking and e-cigarettes of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland is calling on government to deliver a Tobacco Free Future, ending tobacco-related harm, once and for all.

Ireland faces a critical moment in its fight against harm caused by tobacco products. Despite decades of progress, reductions in smoking have stalled, and nearly one in five adults still smoke. Tobacco remains the leading cause of preventable disease and death, continuing to claim almost 100 lives each week and driving health inequalities that shorten lives by up to five years in disadvantaged communities.

Doctors on the front line of our health services are picking up the pieces. Each week, almost 1,000 people are hospitalised due to smoking-related disease. An estimated 20% of all hospitalisations for respiratory conditions, 12% of all hospitalisations for cancers and 10% of all hospitalisations for circulatory diseases, are caused by smoking. Many more attend outpatients, community health services and general practices each week because of smoking-related disease. Doctors want to see this brought to an end.

The harm caused by tobacco products is devastating and entirely preventable. Tobacco is a highly addictive and deadly product – it kills when used exactly as intended by its manufacturers. It costs Ireland billions in healthcare and wider social costs, and it perpetuates cycles of poverty and illness. Most people who smoke wish they had never started, and strong public support exists for action to end the problem for once and for all: three in four people in Ireland back a Tobacco Free Future and eight out of ten people support the phase out of tobacco products completely.

The tools to end this crisis exist. What's needed now is political leadership and action. The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland is calling on government to commit to delivering a Tobacco-Free Future by 2035, with smoking prevalence below 5%. This requires action that moves beyond control to elimination. It's time to begin Ireland's tobacco endgame.



Six Calls to Action for a Tobacco Free Future

1 A New National Policy That Delivers a Tobacco Free Future by 2035

Establish leadership for a Tobacco Free Future by publishing a comprehensive policy and decisive action plan with strong governance, accountability, and cross-party consensus to achieve less than 5% smoking prevalence by 2035.

2 Commit to a Tobacco Free Generation

Take children and young people out of harm's way by legislating to end the sale of tobacco to future generations completely and align protections for children and young people across the island of Ireland.

3 Reduce the Addictiveness, Attractiveness, Affordability, and Availability of Tobacco Products

Regulate for very low nicotine content in tobacco products, remove filters, ban all advertising, strengthen tobacco packaging rules to remove all marketing opportunities and maximise health warnings, use taxation effectively, and enforce retail licensing arrangements to reduce availability of addictive and deadly tobacco products.

4 Stop Tobacco Industry Interference and Hold them Accountable

Cut the tobacco industry out of policymaking completely, join global interference monitoring, and litigate to recover healthcare costs for reinvestment in stop-smoking care.

5 Protect Children and Communities from Tobacco and Nicotine Products

Progress strong regulation of e-cigarettes and novel nicotine products and expand smoke-free spaces to protect everyone.

6 Ensure Everyone Who Wants to Quit Gets the Right Support

Scale specialist stop-smoking care, expand free access to all recommended treatments, and invest in tailored services for pregnant women and disadvantaged communities.

Every day of delay costs lives, leaves children in harm's way, and deepens health inequalities. The time for action is now. It's time to begin Ireland's Tobacco Free Future.

RCPI Clinical Advisory Group on Smoking and E-Cigarettes

6 Calls and 21 specific actions for government:

Call 1: a new national policy that delivers a tobacco free future
1.1 Publish a new national policy and plan with a goal of smoking prevalence of less than 5% by 2035 across all population groups, supported by cross party consensus and overseen by the Oireachtas Committee on Health.
1.2 Ensure protection of young people and reducing health inequalities is at the heart of that policy and plan.
1.3 Re-establish the role of the National Tobacco Control Advisor as National Tobacco Endgame Advisor.
1.4 Convene a National Tobacco Epidemic Emergency Team led by the Chief Medical Officer reporting to government.
1.5 Strengthen and consolidate surveillance of tobacco use and harm in Ireland and establish a Research Centre for a Tobacco Free Future.
Call 2: Commit to a tobacco free generation
2.1 Legislate for a tobacco-free generation and ensure alignment on protection of children and young people across the island of Ireland.
Call 3: Reduce the addictiveness, attractiveness, affordability, and availability of tobacco products
3.1 Set standards and regulate tobacco products to propel a reduction in nicotine content in tobacco products and the removal of filters.
3.2 Use taxation effectively to make smoking less affordable.
3.3 Tackle tobacco product advertising and promotion on the internet and in international press, placement of products in national and international television and film and bring a complete end to all opportunities for sponsorship.
3.4 Strengthen regulation on packaging: rotate health warnings and remove all marketing.
3.5 Implement recently established arrangements for tobacco retail licensing in Ireland to reduce the availability of highly addictive and deadly tobacco products.

Call 4: Stop tobacco industry interference and hold them accountable
4.1 Publish, implement and audit against national guidance for public officials on best practice in protecting policy-making against tobacco industry interference.
4.2 Participate in the Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index.
4.3 Use litigation to recover the costs incurred for healthcare to treat disease caused by smoking.
4.4 Invest the money recouped in stop smoking care and to support the retail sector transition away from the sale of high addictive and deadly tobacco products.
Call 5: Protect children and communities from tobacco and nicotine products
5.1 Ensure effective implementation of legislation banning sale of e-cigarettes to children and young people under 18 years of age.
5.2 Progress further legislation and regulation of e-cigarettes and novel nicotine products to protect children and young people.
5.3 Expand smoke-free spaces so everyone can breathe clean air, especially for vulnerable groups.
Call 6: Ensure everyone who wants to quit gets the right support
6.1 Expand free access to stop smoking medicines to include all treatments recommended in national guidelines.
6.2 Make significant investment in and urgently develop stop smoking services for women who are pregnant.
6.3 Invest in the development and scaling of targeted and tailored stop smoking care in disadvantaged communities to tackle inequalities in smoking.



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