

E-cigarettes a breath of fresh air?

By Jim Nowlan

Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel recently pushed through his city council a prohibition of “smoking” electronic or e-cigarettes in any public spaces that ban smoking of tobacco cigarettes.

Is that a good idea? The issue is sure to come before the Illinois Generally Assembly.

As with nearly all public issues, the matter sharply divides those who see e-cigarettes as a cessation of smoking tool versus those who see the use of e-cigarettes as a gateway for youth to the smoking of the real thing.

This past year, Illinois banned sale of e-cigarettes to those under 18. Rep. Kathleen Willis (D-Addison), a chief sponsor of the ban, is also looking into state prohibition on advertising of e-cigarettes, though she admits this may be a federal rather than state issue.

In the interests of providing readers complete information (as complete as this space allows), I decided to experiment with e-cigarettes.

Never having smoked before (gad, I must have been a boring kid), I sought reinforcement from a veteran, one-pack-a-day smoker friend.

I went to the local Casey’s to buy a “pack” of e-cigarettes. When I told her of my mission, the cashier in the convenience store gave me her own Njoy-brand pack, saying she had tried them and didn’t like them.

“They have no ending, like a real cigarette; you just keep puffing,” the pert young woman, a smoker, said. She seems to enjoys some special satisfaction of the final drag on a cigarette.

“They won’t help me stop,” she declared, nor have they for anyone she knows.

“Smokers I know substitute e-cigarettes when in a bar,” my new-found expert said, “but smoke real cigarettes outside.”

Undaunted, my own smoker friend and I “lighted up” the e-cigarettes I got for free.

The Njoy cigarette looks like the real thing, but instead of tobacco inside there is a combination of tiny battery, nicotine and water, and atomizer. There is even a red light on the end of the “cigarette” that lights up when you puff.

The \$8 e-cigarette is good for the equivalent of two packs of the real thing.

My veteran smoker friend has smoked since 1975 when he was in the Navy. He has tried quitting a dozen times—gum, patch, cold turkey. Nothing has worked for him.

He took a long pull on the e-cigarette, coughed (too long a drag, he said), and out spewed “smoke,” apparently in the form of water vapor, though critics say the white vapor is filled with all sorts of dastardly things.

“Tastes like nicotine,” said friend. “It is similar to smoking (he added after several more puffs), just not quite as good. It is harsher than a real cigarette, but not as satisfying.”

He then said, “But right now I don’t want a cigarette.”

Then I tried a puff, and think I inhaled because my lungs came to attention, infused with the nicotine-laced air swirling around the lung nodules.

Who knows, maybe I’m hooked.

The American Lung Association and respiratory groups all condemn e-cigarettes as “starter products” that mimic cigarettes for the young, even coming in candy flavors.

[(Are you old enough to remember candy cigarettes—sticks of white sugar with pink ends?)]

The 2012 National Youth Tobacco Survey of 25,000 U.S. middle and high school students found that e-cigarette use doubled between 2011 and 2012 to about 10 percent of all youth but that use of real tobacco products apparently fell.

Opponents of e-cigarettes say that the vapor contains possibly toxic chemicals, but other sources say the levels were one-thousandth those of real cigarette smoke.

On the other hand, Chicago aldermen who favor e-cigarettes in public places said that, in the one case, the alderman hasn't smoked since November, and that another was using e-cigarettes to help him kick the tobacco habit.

Created in 2003, e-cigarettes need much more study. Indeed, the Federal Drug Administration hasn't yet provided any guidance on the topic.

The key issues for me are the possible cessation of smoking benefits versus the "starter product" argument that they will lead to greater smoking of real tobacco by young people.

[This would be a close call for me if I were a state legislator, a kind of toss-up. But there can be no toss-ups in the legislature. Even "not voting" is a vote against a bill, because in the Illinois legislature a bill must pass by a majority "of all those elected.]

So, drawing on my civil liberties values, I would vote to allow continued use of e-cigarettes in public places, until evidence might come forward of the product's real harm to others.