

Workplace smoking ban saves over 3,700 lives in under four years

Ireland's workplace smoking ban – the first initiative of its kind in the world – saved more than 3,700 lives in less than four years after it was implemented in 2004, according to campaigners who gathered to mark its 20th anniversary in March. However, the event served to highlight the need to clamp down on the rising e-cigarette epidemic among young people.



Tánaiste Micheál Martin, who pushed through the smoking ban legislation as Health Minister in 2004, was joined at Government buildings by representatives of the Irish Heart Foundation, its ASH Council and other organisations involved in its initiation.

Speaking at the 20th anniversary of the ban on 29 March, the Tánaiste said the landmark public health measure, which outlawed smoking inside every workplace, including pubs and restaurants, represented one of the “most memorable and significant moments” of his political career.

“At the time, there was huge opposition to the smoking ban

and doubts over whether it would ever succeed, particularly in our hospitality industry. The decision sparked ferocious debate in what was the first real discussion on public health in Ireland.

“Shortly after its introduction, it came to be viewed as an important protective measure for the health of workers in every sector., and it was clear that the public wanted it. Despite its success, we cannot allow ourselves to become complacent when it comes to the war on smoking. Tobacco, along with the new threat of vaping, continue to cause huge damage to people in this country.”

LIFESAVING IMPACT OF BAN

Chris Macey, Director of Advocacy and Patient Support with the Irish Heart Foundation, described the ban as

one of the most important pieces of legislation ever introduced.

“It is estimated that it saved more than 3,700 lives in Ireland in the first three-and-a-half years after its implementation – almost 2.7 lives a day. It resulted in an immediate 26% reduction in ischaemic heart disease and a 32% drop in stroke cases. As countries across the world followed suit, the lifesaving impact of the law is beyond measure.

“However, now two decades on, Ireland must pursue bold and ambitious measures on tobacco and vape control, according to Macey. “Tobacco is still responsible for 4,500 deaths a year in Ireland, while an e-cigarette epidemic is responsible for driving nicotine addiction among young people. Smoking rates among teenagers are increasing for the first time in a generation, most likely due to the gateway effect from vaping.”

The Irish Heart Foundation believes the Government needs to raise the legal age for the sale of tobacco and vaping products from 18 to 21. Macey also said that Ireland needs to follow UK proposals, making it illegal for anyone born after a certain year to buy tobacco products.

This can be achieved by raising the legal age for its sale by one year, every year. “Ireland can become a tobacco and nicotine-free society, but only bold, ambitious measures can achieve this reality,” he said.



Tánaiste Micheál Martin pictured with representatives from the Irish Heart Foundation, ASH Ireland, Irish Cancer Society, Environmental Health Association of Ireland, Office of Tobacco Control, Tobacco Free Research Institute and the HSE, who were involved in initiating the workplace smoking ban in 2004.