

IEVA Position: E-cigarettes contribution to Harm Reduction

The principle of Harm Reduction in the field of health is not new - it was first used in relation to alcohol abuse, later to drug addiction and to control the sprees of HIV/AIDS, leading to huge reductions in death and disease caused by this condition.

In the past, Governments have introduced measures to help people quit, actions bolstered by 14 years of work implementing commitments under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Despite these efforts, the number of those who die of smoking related diseases is on the rise, set to reaching 8 million worldwide by 2030. It is clear that regulatory measures alone cannot solve this epidemic, and that legislation offers no silver bullet: many people are unable to quit, despite all the efforts from authorities. The question for Governments and the WHO is how to help those who cannot give up their addiction when legislative measures do not work.

In 1976, Professor Michael Russell concluded that 'people smoke for the nicotine but are harmed by the tar'¹. It became clear that if the tar were to be removed the harm attributed to cigarettes could be eliminated. Since then, several companies have developed alternative products such as electronic cigarettes which reduce tar exposure. The WHO looks at 'tobacco control' as a range of supply, demand and harm reduction strategies that aim to improve health by eliminating or reducing consumption and exposure to tobacco and the smoke. Despite this, the WHO and many authorities have yet to recognize the e-cigarettes harm reduction potential, but instead insist on promoting the use of nicotine replacement therapy (NTS). Evidence by randomized control trials concluded that e-cigarettes are twice as effective as NRTs² as a smoking cessation tool.

As such, authorities should encourage smokers who cannot quit completely to switch to less harmful forms of nicotine consumption such as vaping.

Vaping as a harm reduction tool

E-cigarettes offer smokers an alternative which is significantly less harmful than smoking, as emphasized by regulators such as Public Health England³, the Royal College of Physicians⁴, the German Federal Office for Drugs⁵, the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council⁶ (CESE) and RIVM⁷. Public Health England concluded, following a landmark review of the available evidence, that e-cigarettes represent at least 95% harm reduction versus conventional cigarettes. Smokers are also being encouraged to switch to e-cigarettes by lawmakers in Canada⁸ and New Zealand⁹.

¹ Russell, M. (1976). Low-tar, medium-nicotine cigarettes: a new approach to safer smoking. British Medical Journal (BMJ).

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1808779>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/e-cigarettes-and-vaping-policy-regulation-and-guidance>

⁴ <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/promote-e-cigarettes-widely-substitute-smoking-says-new-rcp-report>

⁵ <https://www.drogenbeauftragte.de/fileadmin/dateien->

[dba/Drogenbeauftragte/4_Presse/1_Pressemitteilungen/2017/2017_III_Quartal/170807_BMG_Drogenbericht_2017_online_RZ.pdf](https://www.drogenbeauftragte.de/fileadmin/dateien-dba/Drogenbeauftragte/4_Presse/1_Pressemitteilungen/2017/2017_III_Quartal/170807_BMG_Drogenbericht_2017_online_RZ.pdf)

⁶ https://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Avis/2019/2019_02_addictions.pdf

⁷ <https://www.rivm.nl/bibliotheek/rapporten/2015-0144.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/canada-tobacco-strategy/overview-canada-tobacco-strategy.html>

⁹ <https://www.hpa.org.nz/vaping>

In 2016, the UK Royal College of Physicians reported that ‘the hazard to health arising from long-term vapour inhalation from e-cigarettes is unlikely to exceed 5% of the harm from smoking tobacco’. This was supported by Public Health England’s 2018 e-cigarette evidence review, which concluded that ‘cancer potencies of e-cigarettes were largely under 0.5% of the risk of smoking’¹⁰. Public Health England also underlined that ‘to date, there have been no identified health risks of passive vaping to bystanders’. Meanwhile, survey data from across the world shows that more than half of smokers wrongfully believe vaping to be just as harmful as smoking. This is not helped by legislation that puts smoking and vaping on an equal footing in terms of how they are sold and marketed. Such approaches are in contrast to those in countries such as New Zealand, where specific regulation differentiating vaping products from tobacco was introduced.

Accurately informing smokers about less risky alternatives to smoking can be a key driver for smoking cessation. These kinds of policies in the UK have led to the sharpest declines in cigarette smoking in decades (from 19.9% in 2011 to 14.9% in 2017)¹¹, including the opening of two vape shops in hospitals in West Midlands¹². More recently, the UK Government published its Green Paper¹³ on prevention in healthcare which aims to make the UK smoke-free by 2030 by encouraging smokers to quit or switch to harm-reduced alternatives such as e-cigarettes.

Concerns exist as to whether vaping may create nicotine addiction in never-smokers or youth. A recent study into youth usage of e-cigarettes across the UK found that ‘most e-cigarette experimentation does not turn into regular use, and levels of regular use in young never-smokers remain very low’¹⁴.

Vaping is also far less detrimental to the environment as compared to traditional cigarettes. Recent statistics show that the non-biodegradable cigarette butts are responsible for around 25-50% of all collected litter¹⁵ and represent the single greatest source of ocean pollution, surpassing plastic. By contrast, vaping is known to have a much lower impact and has the potential to drastically reduce the quantities of discarded butts¹⁶. In addition, most modern e-cigarettes are rechargeable devices with refillable liquid systems, which further limit waste.

E-cigarettes can have a significant positive impact and should be recognized as a harm reduction tool. Smokers should be encouraged to switch from traditional cigarettes to proven less harmful alternatives such as e-cigarettes, following the example of the UK, New Zealand and Canadian Governments.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-evidence-review>

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/adultsmokinghabitsingreatbritain/2017>

¹² <https://www.ecigwizard.com/blogs/news/vape-shops-open-at-nhs-hospitals>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s-consultation-document>

¹⁴ Bauld, L. et al (2017): ‘Young people’s use of e-cigarettes across the UK: Findings from five surveys 2015–2017.’ International journal of environmental research and public health 14

¹⁵ https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/20/Suppl_1/1

¹⁶ Policy Options (23 Jan 2019): ‘The rise of e-cigarettes could drastically reduce an age-old environmental scourge: millions of discarded butts. Let’s factor it into the debate’. A.R. Houston & A. Howard