



Whither the e-cigarette?

Jennifer O’Loughlin · Robert J. Wellman · Louise Potvin

Received: 4 February 2016 / Accepted: 8 February 2016 / Published online: 14 March 2016
© Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+) 2016

The safety and utility of electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) is currently a topic of hot debate in the medical and public health communities (Künzli 2014), and policy-makers worldwide are grappling with ENDS-related decision-making. Developing public health policy and programming for ENDS at this point in time are uncomfortably akin to gambling, since we remain in the dark about far too many ENDS issues. Because the uncertainty and debate will persist until the evidence is comprehensive and irrefutable (to the extent that it can be), the IJPH launched a special call for e-cigarette research contributions. But, despite numerous innovative and well-executed articles in this issue, the contributions collectively constitute in essence, a plea for more research. Specifically, hypotheses warranting extensive and intensive investigation include (1) the Gateway Hypothesis [i.e., that e-cigarettes lead never smokers to begin using combustible tobacco products (Bunnell et al. 2014; Kandel and Kandel

2014)]; (2) the Renormalization Hypothesis [i.e., that public acceptance of e-cigarettes will lead to renormalization of smoking (Fairchild et al. 2014)]; and (3) the Quit Hypothesis [i.e., that e-cigarettes provide a way to help smokers quit (Adkison et al. 2013)]. Also under-researched is whether laws that treat ENDS and combustible cigarettes on the same footing are feasible and acceptable.

While many claim that ENDS are considerably safer than combustible tobacco products (e.g., McNeil et al. 2015), there is no clear evidence of their efficacy as cessation aids or their long-term safety. Thus, in the spirit of the Precautionary Principle, and until sufficient evidence accumulates, it may be safer (and we may sleep better at night) to treat ENDS as we do any other tobacco product, regulating their distribution and use, and taxing them in the same way that we tax all tobacco products.

This editorial is part of the special issue “Electronic Cigarettes and Public Health”.

J. O’Loughlin (✉)
Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health, ESPUM, University of Montréal, 7101 avenue du Parc, Montréal, QC H3N 1X9, Canada
e-mail: jennifer.oloughlin@umontreal.ca

R. J. Wellman
Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, USA
e-mail: Robert.Wellman@umassmed.edu

L. Potvin
Chaire de Recherche du Canada, Approches Communautaires et Inégalités de Santé, Montréal, Canada
e-mail: louise.potvin@umontreal.ca

References

- Adkison SE, O’Connor RJ, Bansal-Travers M, Hyland A, Borland R, Yong HH, Cummings KM, McNeil A, Thrasher JF, Hammond D, Fong GT (2013) Electronic nicotine delivery systems: international tobacco control four-country survey. *Am J Prev Med* 44(3):207–215. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2012.10.018
- Bunnell RE, Agaku IT, Arrazola RA, Apelberg BJ, Caraballo RS, Corey CC, Coleman BN, Dube SR, King BA (2014) Intentions to smoke cigarettes among never-smoking US middle and high school electronic cigarette users: National Youth Tobacco Survey, 2011–2013. *Nicotine Tob Res* 17(2):228–235. doi:10.1093/ntr/ntu166
- Fairchild AL, Bayer R, Colgrove J (2014) The renormalization of smoking? E-cigarettes and the tobacco “endgame”. *N Engl J Med* 370(4):293–295. doi:10.1056/NEJMp1313940
- Kandel ER, Kandel DB (2014) A molecular basis for nicotine as a gateway drug. *N Engl J Med* 371:932–943. doi:10.1056/NEJMs1405092

Künzli N (2014) To e-smoke or not to e-smoke: is that a question? *Int J Public Health* 59(5):679–680. doi:10.1007/s00038-014-0598-y

McNeil A, Brose LS, Calder R, Hitchman SC, Hajek P, McRobbie H (2015) E-cigarettes: an evidence update. A report commissioned

by Public Health England. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/457102/E-cigarettes_an_evidence_update_A_report_commissioned_by_Public_Health_England_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 27 Jan 2016