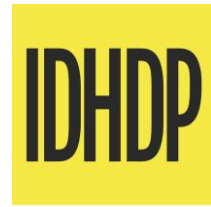


Patrons

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INTERNATIONAL DOCTORS FOR HEALTHIER DRUG POLICIES

If we care for people who use drugs we should be promoting e-cigarettes

Harm Reduction does exactly what it says; it takes any number of potentially dangerous activities and makes them less dangerous. From wearing a crash helmet when riding a motorbike to having a strong password for your online banking. For people who inject drugs (“PWID”) we provide sterile equipment and/or medicines like methadone to reduce the likelihood of catching HIV or hepatitis C, dying from overdoses and many other positive outcomes. The argument put forward by some, that it encourages drug use, is firstly not supported by the evidence and even if there was a small increase it is surely better for 1100 people to ride motorbikes with helmets than 1000 without?

Many of us who are passionate harm reductionists in the illicit drugs world have been slow to see the obvious similarity with what could yet prove to be one of most important harm reduction interventions developed thus far, e-cigarettes.

Cigarettes/tobacco kills about 6 million people a year and is one of the biggest public health threats the world is facing. Tobacco kills up to half of smokers and with 80% of smokers living in LMICs, where the burden of death is heaviest, the repercussion for economic development is obvious.

This must be the most immoral drug dealing in the world. The monumental profits from selling this lethal drug end up largely with shareholders in the developed world where increasingly strict regulations about both sale and use have been implemented. In stark contrast the promotion of cigarettes in some poorer countries is at a level unseen for decades in the richest ones.

Further, 90% of people who have severe mental illness smoke resulting in enormous amounts of physical health problems and the disease that causes most morbidity and mortality in PWIDs when they are settled in treatment is COAD, a direct result of smoking. The top three global health problems: Ischaemic heart disease, CVA and COAD are directly related to smoking.

E-cigarettes are a highly effective intervention for those who can't or don't want to stop using nicotine. According to a recent RCP report e-cigarettes are at least 95% safer than smoking – yes 95%. However, yet again, contrary to all the evidence, some say e-cigarettes encourage smoking and this is obstructing making this life saving intervention available and accessible to all.

Extraordinarily, this extremely useful harm reduction tool, far from being promoted everywhere is being banned in an increasing number of countries. There seems to be a “war on e-cigarettes” with vendors being prosecuted and even jailed in countries as diverse as India and Australia. “Big pharma,” who have put millions into nicotine replacement therapy, and tobacco companies who have been left behind in the development are both supporting the anti-e-cigarette propaganda.

So why am I writing this now? Slightly reluctantly I went to speak at the Global Forum on Nicotine in Warsaw and had my eyes firmly opened. The first evening began with a film by Aaron Biebert “[A Billion Lives](#)”, well worth watching and the next morning was a meeting to discuss the case for an international organisation to represent the interests of nicotine consumers. What struck me was the absolute passion and compassion of these consumers and the enormous struggle that was ahead. I was to be shown evidence of politicians and most sadly for me doctors and other health professionals speaking falsehoods, not looking at the evidence and instead taking a dogmatic stance.

By the time I came to my presentation on the last afternoon, I knew it was no different than what I had been doing for years - trying to improve the health of people who use drugs like heroin but instead it was nicotine.

E-cigarettes could possibly be the greatest public health intervention of our lifetime. Everything possible must be done to make them available and accessible to all. Particular care must be made to ensure that this new much safer way of consuming nicotine isn't only available in the richer countries leaving the lethal hot smoke mechanism (cigarettes) to be sold in their billions to the poorest in the world.

What do you think? Is it time for us to promote e-cigarettes, reduce harm and save millions of lives or do we want to be dogmatic and say it is not our concern?

All the presentations and videos from the Global Forum on Nicotine conference are now available [here](#) additional videos can be see on this [link](#)

Chris Ford and Sebastian Saville 26 June 2016