

Media Release

World Health Organization must not extinguish e-cigarettes, say leading scientists

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Thursday, 29 May, 2014 (London, Paris, Warsaw)--Over 50 leading scientists from 15 countries have appealed this week to the World Health Organization (WHO) to reconsider its intention to classify e-cigarettes the same as regular cigarettes, warning that they risk missing an opportunity to drastically reduce smoking and the illness and death associated with it (1)

Ahead of the WHO sponsored Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) meeting (2) in Moscow this coming October, the scientists have been reacting to a leaked document from a FCTC preparatory meeting indicating that the WHO considers e-cigarettes a “threat” to public health and intends to sideline their use as an accessible alternative to regular tobacco and cigarettes (3).

“If the WHO gets its way and extinguishes e-cigarettes, it will not only have passed up what is clearly one of the biggest public health innovations of the last three decades that could potentially save millions of lives, but it will have abrogated its own responsibility under its own charter to empower consumers to take control of their own health, something which they are already doing themselves in their millions (4),” said Professor Gerry Stimson, Emeritus Professor at the Imperial College in London, a signatory to the letter and organiser of the upcoming inaugural Global Forum on Nicotine. (5) “E-cigarettes are part of the solution, not the problem.”

Globally 1.3 billion people smoke and the WHO estimates that up to one billion tobacco-related premature deaths are possible in the 21st Century – all totally preventable. Such a toll of death, disease and misery demands that we are relentless in our search for all possible practical and ethical ways to reduce this burden.

Tobacco control policy over the past three decades has successfully communicated the harms associated with smoking, encouraged measures to reduce smoking, and drastically cut smoking in some parts of the world – mainly developed countries (but at the same time that smoking is still increasing in many parts of the developing world).

But in the developed world many people continue to smoke - nearly 20 per cent of the UK adult population, nearly 30 per cent in countries like Spain and France. Most smokers want to stop smoking, but many find it hard to give up nicotine, or simply don't want to.

“For the WHO to suggest that e-cigarettes are as risky as other tobacco products would send an erroneous and bleak message to the millions of current e-cigarette users who have used them to quit smoking,” said Robert West, also a signatory to the letter and Professor of Health Psychology and Director of Tobacco Studies at University College in London. “It would discourage smokers from trying them and we would miss out on a major opportunity to reduce smoke related deaths globally.”

Scientists have known for some years that people 'smoke for the nicotine, but die from the

smoke'. The death and disease from smoking arises from inhalation of tar particles and toxic gases drawn into the lungs.

The signatories to the letter strongly believe that tobacco harm reduction tools such as e-cigarettes, and other less harmful products such as snus, could be the solution. People who currently smoke will do much less harm to their health if they consume nicotine in low-risk, non-combustible form.

“E-cigarette use has been a consumer led revolution and grown as a bottom-up public health initiative that could save millions of lives,” said John Britton, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Nottingham, UK. “It has moved at a speed that shows just how much smokers want and will choose nicotine products that don’t kill. I hope the WHO and all public health decision makers can recognise and harness the health opportunities that e-cigarettes can provide.”

In their letter to WHO Director-General Margaret Chan, the 53 signatories argue that tobacco harm reduction products could play a significant role in meeting the 2025 UN objectives to reduce non-communicable diseases.

They argue that the WHO’s targets for reduction of tobacco consumption should be aligned with the ultimate goal of reducing disease and premature death. It is counterproductive to include the reduction of low-risk nicotine products, such as e-cigarettes, *within these targets* - as has been proposed - instead these products should have an important role in *meeting the targets*.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

(1) The letter signed by 53 scientists and policy experts and supporting material are available at the Nicotine Science and Policy web site: <http://nicotinepolicy.net/n-s-p/1753-who-needs-to-see-ecigs-as-part-of-a-solution>

(2) The Framework Convention of Tobacco Control was agreed in 2003 and sets out a framework for controlling and reducing tobacco consumption. With the notable exception of the United States, most countries (178) are parties to the convention. The sixth session of the Conference of the Parties is due to be held in Moscow from 13-18 October
<http://www.who.int/fctc/en/>

(3) A leaked document suggests that WHO is taking a hostile approach to e-cigarettes and other low-risk alternatives to smoking. These documents and a commentary are available here:

- FCTC Bureau minutes <http://nicotinepolicy.net/n-s-p/1753-who-needs-to-see-ecigs-as-part-of-a-solution> (see especially para 23, 72 and 69-75)
- Commentary: WHO plans e-cigarette offensive: <http://nicotinepolicy.net/n-s-p/1753-who-needs-to-see-ecigs-as-part-of-a-solution>

(4) I Action on Smoking and Health. (2014). <http://www.ash.org.uk/media-room/press-releases/over-2-million-britons-now-regularly-use-electronic-cigarettes>. In the UK the number

of people using e-cigarettes has tripled in just two years to 2.1 million – around one third are now ex-smokers.

(5) The Global Forum on Nicotine will be held in Warsaw on 27-28 June <http://gfn.net.co/>

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