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Nuance action needed to solve global smoking epidemic

By Cliff Douglas

In my 36 years of fighting the smoking epidemic, one of the most important lessons I've learned is that there is no single action that supports all adults who smoke trying to quit. One size does not fit all. I am heartened that tobacco use remains a key priority for global health leaders, as evidenced by the tenth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP10) last week. Leaders from the 168 countries that have signed the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) spent five days discussing the best practices to lower smoking rates from a top-down policy approach.

But I am concerned that leaders also discussed measures designed to interfere with the beneficial use of reduced-risk nicotine products, such as e-cigarettes, lozenges, and pouches. These stances threaten to slow, not accelerate, smoking cessation rates, which ultimately will result in more lives lost to lethal combustible tobacco use.

The future success of the WHO FCTC hinges on more nuanced, evidence-based actions. Tobacco control policies must make traditional smoking cessation tools, including medications and nicotine replacement therapies, widely available. But they must also include carefully regulated, reduced-risk products for adults who cannot or otherwise will not quit. These two strategies can and should work harmoniously to achieve the best possible public health outcome.

The global Doctors' Survey conducted by Sermo and a survey conducted by a team at Rutgers University and the University of Pennsylvania found that a shocking majority of health care providers incorrectly believe that nicotine causes the deadly illnesses resulting from tobacco use. This is not true – yet it remained a pervasive belief at COP10. This misconception risks leaving millions of smokers without viable alternatives to conventional cigarettes, and it is also contrary to the leading science. Some of the key policies laced with misconceptions discussed at COP10 continue to threaten public health. There was an attempt to categorize aerosols emitted from novel and emerging tobacco products as "smoke," which is highly misleading and would only increase the existing confusion of millions of people in need of accurate information. The framework also once again failed to acknowledge the role that some reduced-risk products can play in

lowering smoking rates. I am concerned many adults who smoke in countries that ignore the role of reduced-risk systems will not have adequate access to tools that would help them quit. Not all countries have adopted WHO's proposals. The UK government, for example, has based its rational public health and medical approach to ending the smoking epidemic on recognition that people can substantially reduce their risk of illness and early death by switching from smoking to vaping. Its National Health Service has gone so far as to introduce a "swap to stop" initiative for current smokers. Japan and Sweden have also adopted positions on tobacco control that increase adult access to reduced-risk products and have dramatically lowered their smoking rates as a result. Such science-based case studies as those presented by the UK, Japan and Sweden should not be ignored or dismissed. There is no doubt in my mind that my tobacco control colleagues at COP10 are diligently committed to fighting the smoking epidemic – just as I am. We share the common goal of eliminating what remains the leading cause of preventable death globally. I would urge these world leaders, however, to embrace more nuanced actions that are built on the most recent, robust scientific data – including reputable sources like the latest Cochrane Review, which found with high certainty that e-cigarettes are more effective than traditional nicotine replacement therapies at helping people who smoke quit.

Taking a more prohibitive approach to nicotine products across the board will leave many adults who smoke behind, with devastating consequences. Rather than focusing solely on restricting supply and demand, as exemplified by the MPOWER policies, the WHO FCTC should explore evidence-based strategies that can support all people who smoke in their journeys to quit. Some adults will successfully quit using traditional measures, which I always strongly encourage them to try, but many more will not. And these individuals deserve tools that will reduce their exposure to harmful chemicals.

The commitment to end the smoking epidemic is a massive, noble undertaking, to which my colleagues and I have dedicated our entire professional lives. We must take a humanistic and science-based approach to improve global health and take full advantage of all the available tools at our disposal, including those that provide adults with less risky methods of consuming nicotine.

Quitting smoking beneficial at any age

While confirming that smoking leads to brain shrinkage, the study underscored the consequences of this shrinkage, which involves the loss of neurons and their connections. This atrophy can impair brain function, particularly in critical areas like the hippocampus, which is crucial for memory formation. The research highlighted that smokers exhibit an “older” brain due to a decreased brain volume, which is normally associated with the aging process.

Dr. Bierut explained that smoking introduces various toxic chemicals into the body, leading to lower oxygen levels in the blood, which over time, starve the brain. Dr. Dung Trinh from the Healthy Brain Clinic in Long Beach, CA, emphasized that vascular damage, reduced blood flow, oxidative stress, and inflammation caused by smoking can result in cell/neuron death and atrophy.

The researchers highlighted that while the original brain mass cannot be recovered, quitting smoking is a crucial step to halt further brain shrinkage. Dr. Bierut emphasizes the importance of quitting, stating that it is never too late to quit, with health benefits felt even later in life. The research aims to draw attention to reducing modifiable risk factors for dementia in an aging population.

In conclusion, the study emphasized the protective effect of smoking cessation, encouraging smokers to try quitting at any age, and highlighted the modifiable risk factors for cognitive decline, dementia, and Alzheimer’s disease. Tobacco harm reduction (THR) experts would highlight that for those smokers who have tried and failed to quit, this study indicates the importance of at least switching to safer nicotine alternatives to decrease the damage caused by

cigarette smoke.

A recent study by a research team from the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health, says that there is enough scientific evidence available to support the use of vaping products for smoking cessation in adults.

Titled, “Nicotine e-cigarettes as a tool for smoking cessation,” the study was led by Kenneth Warner, dean emeritus and the Avedis Donabedian Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health and published in Nature Medicine.

Warner and colleagues took a global view of vaping, analyzing the level of smoking cessation success of countries which endorse the use of vapes for smoking cessation and countries which do not.

They found that while North America acknowledged the potential benefits of vaping, e-cigarettes are not recommended for smoking cessation. On the other hand, in the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand there is high-level support and promotion of the products for smoking cessation, and this is reflected in these countries’ smoking rates. “We believe that governments, medical professional groups and individual health care professionals in countries such as the U.S., Canada and Australia should give greater consideration to the potential of e-cigarettes for increasing smoking cessation,” said Warner. “E-cigarettes are not the magic bullet that will end the devastation wrought by cigarette smoking, but they can contribute to that lofty public health goal.”

<https://www.vapingpost.com/2024/01/21/quitting-smoking-can-prevent-brain-shrinkage/>

Sensibly regulate tobacco harm reduction products

ISLAMABAD: Supporting the decision of banning the sale of e-cigarettes and vapes to minors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) reiterated its call for sensibly regulating the tobacco harm reduction products in Pakistan.

“Under no circumstances young people and minors should have access to these products,” said Arshad Ali Syed, Project Director of ARI. However, he added that unless regulations are developed, there is a strong possibility of misuse. “There are around 400 outlets of THR products in major cities of the country, which are legally imported and sold. However, there are no clear regulations about them.”

He called for urgent regulations which should ensure that these products are only available to adult smokers who have been unable to quit combustible smoking.

An official notification issued by Home and Tribal Affairs Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said the decision has been taken in wake of an alarming increase in use of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and vaping devices particularly among children and youth in the province. In this regard, Arshad added Pakistan can study and follow the regulations regarding vaping products in UK. The Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016, which was amended in 2020, covered every aspect of vaping products,

from restricting the capacity of e-cigarette tanks to labelling requirements and warnings.

He said the inclusion of health professionals – doctors – in recommending the THR products for the purpose of cessation for adult smokers should be an essential part of the regulations. He added that according to research, tobacco harm reduction reduces the damage caused by the toxins generated by tobacco combustion for adult smokers unable or unwilling to stop.

The WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) recognizes harm reduction as an integral part of a comprehensive approach, but only in reference to eliminating or reducing consumption.

“Bans seldom work. Pakistan has to weigh its options and opt for the advances in research on tobacco control. For the huge number of adult smokers, tobacco harm reduction products are an easy and accessible path to health and ultimately completely quitting.”

In the recent past, he said the successive governments have imposed taxes on tobacco harm reduction products but did not come up with comprehensive regulations. He said it is time to wider consultation with all stakeholders for ensuring that these products help adult smokers in reducing harm to their health and quitting smoking.

COP 10 urges parties to protect environment, people from tobacco

The Tenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) has concluded with a far-reaching decision that will protect the environment and the health of people throughout the world from the ravages of tobacco.

"We have taken an historic decision on Article 18," said Dr Adriana Blanco Marquizo, Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat, describing action to strengthen the article of WHO FCTC focused on the protection of the environment and the health of all people.

"The decision urges Parties to take account of the environmental impacts from the cultivation, manufacture, consumption and waste disposal of tobacco products, and to strengthen the implementation of this article, including through national policies related to tobacco and protection of the environment," Dr Blanco Marquizo said.

The Conference of the Parties is the governing body of the WHO FCTC, which is the first international treaty negotiated under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO FCTC has led international tobacco-control efforts for more than 20 years.

Representatives from 142 Parties gathered here 5–10 February to tackle a range of issues from progress on implementation of the treaty to the regulation of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

Globally, some 200 000 hectares of land are cleared every year for tobacco cultivation.

The decision also addresses the issue of cigarette filters. An estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are thrown away annually worldwide, representing 1.69 billion pounds of toxic trash containing plastics.

Under specific circumstances – such as sunlight and moisture – cigarette filters break down into smaller plastic pieces, eventually leaching out some of the 7000 chemicals contained in a single cigarette. Many of those chemicals are environmentally toxic. The decision on Article 18 is very timely given the ongoing intergovernmental negotiation committees working to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment.

Another important decision was taken at COP10 to strengthen guidelines on cross-border tobacco advertising,

promotion and sponsorship, and the depiction of tobacco in the entertainment media.

In addition, two expert groups were established – one to work on forward-looking tobacco-control measures under Article 2.1 of the WHO FCTC and the other to focus on Article 19, which concerns liability.

Other decisions adopted by COP10 were related to the promotion of human rights through the WHO FCTC as well as strengthening the WHO FCTC Investment Fund.

The Parties also agreed to extend by five years the mandate of the Global Strategy to Accelerate Tobacco Control 2019–2025: Advancing sustainable development through the implementation of the WHO FCTC 2019–2025, so that it fully aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

COP10 also adopted the Panama Declaration, which draws attention to the fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the tobacco industry and the interests of public health. The Declaration also makes clear the need for policy coherence within governments to comply with the requirements of Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC, which aims to protect public health policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.

COP10 was open to the media, which had the opportunity to observe all public and open sessions, enabling reporters to witness more than 1000 delegates from around the world unite over six days to consider and take action on important issues related to implementation of the Convention.

They saw youth organizations and young activists from around the world gather under the common banner of "Global Youth Voices" to deliver a powerful message, reminding Parties that they have "the power to change the course of our future".

"Throughout this week, youth worldwide will be watching," the young activists said. "Future generations will remember you as the ones who protected them or the ones who failed them and put them in danger."

<https://fctc.who.int/newsroom/news/item/10-02-2024-cop10-adopted-historic-decisions-to-protect-the-environment-from-the-harms-of-tobacco-and-to-address-cross-border-tobacco-advertising-promotion-and-sponsorship-and-the-depiction-of-tobacco-in-entertainment-media>

Vaping beats nicotine gum for smokers trying to quit, study finds

Whether it's part of a New Year's resolution or just following doctor's orders, ditching cigarettes is easier said than done. And while nicotine gum has long been available to help soothe the withdrawal cravings, a quitter could be better off vaping instead as a stop-gap, according to the results of a clinical trial published by the American Medical Association. Smokers who turned to e-cigarettes to help them stop smoking were more likely to have stayed quit after 6 months than those who chewed gum, according to the research team, which included Queen Mary University in London and Peking University in Beijing.

The findings, which were carried in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine, showed 16% of the 1,100 people surveyed and who switched to e-cigarettes had stopped smoking after 6 months, compared with about 9% of those who tried nicotine

chewing gum, which users often struggle with due to side effects such as nausea.

The researchers found no difference between using vapes and taking varenicline, a medication said to inhibit nicotine cravings.

But there is a downside: Those who took to vaping as a kind of halfway house were also likely 6 months later to be still vaping - which, the researchers, said, brings with it separate health concerns.

In contrast, those who took to the other quit methods covered by the trial - chewing nicotine gum or taking medication - were weaned off those methods a half year later. According to a study published in the journal Nature in mid-February, some negative effects of smoking on the human immune system can linger long after someone quits.

<https://news.yahoo.com/study-vaping-beats-nicotine-gum-174157443.html>

Anti-smoking project in 30 educational institutions

Lahore: Additional Deputy Commissioner General (ADCG) Dr Shahab Aslam said that an anti-smoking program would be launched strictly in educational institutions of the district to make the new generation smoking free.

Chairing a meeting of District Anti-Smoking Implementation Committee, he said that more than 160,000 people died due to smoking per annum in Pakistan including 1200 children of the age of 5 to 15 years.

He said that a comprehensive mechanism would be adopted to stop the availability of cigarettes and tobacco products to children whereas all hotels and restaurants would be made smoking-free across the district.

He said that initially 30 educational institutions would be selected to start the anti-smoking program as a pilot project for achieving 100 percent results of this drive.

In this connection, the CEO Education and Director Colleges were asked to designate 30 educational institutions so that the project could be initiated as early as possible, he added.

He said that although anti-smoking law existed, yet it was not being implemented in toto. Therefore, a meeting of the anti-smoking task force would be convened very soon for strict implementation on the law.

He said that district regional transport authority, city traffic police and Pakistan Railways officers would also be taken on

board to make public transport free of smoking. In this connection, stickers and boards inscribed with No-Smoking would be displayed in addition to arranging training sessions for drivers and other crew of public transport.

He also directed Parks & Horticulture Authority (PHA) officers to take appropriate measures for sensitizing public parks visitors about harmful effects of smoking.

He said that a conference of Ulema-o-Mashaikh would be arranged during the first week of Ramazan-ul-Mubarak so that they could play their dynamic role in making the new generation smoking-free.

He said that Social Welfare & Bait-ul-Maal Faisalabad, Civil Society Organization and District Health Authority would also be mobilized to launch an awareness campaign against smoking whereas a Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) would also be signed with the Faisalabad Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FCCI) for their contribution to the anti-smoking drive.

Muhammad Aftab, an officer from National Health Ministry, Sadiq-ul-Hasan, Divisional Coordinator for Anti-Smoking, and representatives of various departments were also present in the meeting.

<https://pakobserver.net/anti-smoking-project-to-start-in-30-educational-institutions/>

Disposable vapes ban 'could lead to relapse in people trying to quit smoking'

A ban on disposable vapes could discourage the use of e-cigarettes among people who are trying to quit smoking, research has found.

The government is considering a ban over concerns that children are using the products and becoming addicted. However, a study by academics at University College London and funded by Cancer Research UK has found it would also affect 2.6 million adults across Great Britain, 1.2 million of whom smoke and a further 744,000 who have previously. The research, published in the journal Public Health, was based on a survey of 69,973 adults. It found that between January 2021 and August 2023 the percentage of the population using disposable e-cigarettes grew from 0.1% to 4.9%. The researchers said that although preventing the uptake of vaping by children and those who have never smoked was a "public health priority", the ban may inadvertently discourage the use of e-cigarettes among people who are trying to quit smoking. The study said: "Vaping is substantially less harmful than smoking, so it is essential that a ban on disposables does not discourage people who smoke from switching to vaping." Dr Sarah Jackson of UCL's Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, and the lead author of the study, said: "Our study suggests a ban on disposable e-cigarettes would affect an estimated 2.6 million people in England, Wales and Scotland. "While banning disposables might seem like a straightfor-

ward solution to reduce youth vaping, it could have substantial unintended consequences for people who smoke.

"In the event of a ban, it would be important to encourage current and ex-smokers who use disposables to switch to other types of e-cigarettes rather than going back to just smoking tobacco."

Prof Jamie Brown, the senior author of the study, said: "There is a need for action to reduce disposable vaping among young people who have never smoked. However, trade-offs need to be carefully considered. A ban may discourage use of e-cigarettes among people trying to quit smoking and may induce relapse among those who have already used disposables to quit.

"Cigarettes are far more harmful to our health and are not currently banned, and a ban on disposable e-cigarettes may signal to large numbers of people that these products are worse for our health or that their harm is comparable to that caused by smoking tobacco."

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/jan/24/disposable-vapes-ban-e-cigarette-use-quit-smoking-research-study?fbclid=IwAR1xUNXVJ96YngQ8Igc4vBRMySnjJAC4z6IMbvx78AmnPaMN1TGH3q2-84>



Established in 2018, ARI is an initiative aimed at filling gaps in research and advocacy on ending combustible smoking in a generation. Supported by the Foundation for A Smoke-Free World (FSFW), ARI established the Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR) in 2019 to promote innovative solutions for smoking cessation.

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