

Highly critical report: UK experts say WHO needs better understanding of the evidence on e-cigarettes to inform its international tobacco control treaty.

Better understanding of the evidence on e-cigarettes is needed to inform the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

UK academics are calling for better understanding of the potential benefits of e-cigarettes to reducing the smoking pandemic ahead of an international gathering of countries that have signed the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention for Tobacco Control.

The 7th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), a global public health treaty, will be held in Delhi, India from 7th-12th November 2016. At this meeting, Parties to the treaty (countries and other jurisdictions) will discuss whether similar policy measures recommended to reduce tobacco use should be applied to e-cigarettes.

In advance of the COP the World Health Organisation published a report about Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) and Electronic Non-Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDDS), also known as e-cigarettes. This aimed to summarise the evidence about these devices.

Academics from the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies, a UKCRC Public Health Research Centre of Excellence, have today published a robust critique of the WHO report setting out a series of concerns about the content of the document which, in their view, does not fairly represent existing evidence on e-cigarettes. Their critique examines each element of the WHO report and identifies flaws in the way the evidence is presented and problems with how the report could be interpreted, potentially encouraging countries to adopt excessive restrictions on e-cigarettes which could undermine efforts to reduce smoking.

The UKCTAS critique points to evidence set out in the recent Royal College of Physicians' report 'Nicotine without Smoke' and subsequent research which recognise that e-cigarettes are far less harmful than smoking and that smokers who find it difficult to stop should be encouraged to use them.

The WHO report fails to accurately present what is already known about e-cigarettes. In particular, it: positions e-cigarettes as a threat rather than an opportunity to reduce smoking; fails to accurately quantify any risks of e-cigarettes compared with smoking; misrepresents existing evidence about any harms to bystanders; discounts the fact that e-cigarettes are helping smokers to quit; does not recognise the place of some promotion of e-cigarettes to encourage smokers to switch to these less harmful products; fails to understand that the flavours in e-cigarettes are useful for people trying to stop smoking; mischaracterises the current e-cigarette market and appears to support very restrictive policies on e-cigarettes without including any good policy analysis. In addition, the WHO report does not acknowledge that significant restrictions on e-cigarettes could lead to unintended consequences, including increases in smoking.

Finally, the researchers point out that the WHO briefing is based on four unpublished papers which are still undergoing peer review, which does not allow for open, transparent scrutiny of the evidence. This does not, therefore, provide a good basis for policy making and risks undermining rather than promoting the aims of the FCTC, which is a treaty that was designed to help countries reduce smoking rates and save lives.

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Notes for editors:

- The report 'Commentary on WHO report on electronic nicotine delivery systems and electronic non-delivery systems can be found here: <http://ukctas.net/news/commentary-on-WHO-report-on-ENDS&ENNDS.html>
- The original WHO report to inform the 7th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was published online in August 2016 and can be found here: http://www.who.int/fctc/cop/cop7/FCTC_COP_7_11_EN.pdf
- The Royal College of Physician's Report, 'Nicotine without Smoke' was published in August 2016 and can be found here: <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/nicotine-without-smoke-tobacco-harm-reduction-0>

UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies

The UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies (UKCTAS) is a network of 13 universities (12 in the UK, one in New Zealand) funded by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration. The Centre conducts research, teaching and policy work into tobacco and alcohol, both important public health concerns. UKCTAS aims to deliver an international research and policy development portfolio, and build capacity in tobacco and alcohol research. Our work includes developing strategies for behaviour change in tobacco and alcohol use, assessing risks, identifying measures to reduce harm, monitoring the tobacco and alcohol industries, and developing effective public policies to improve public health and wellbeing. UKCTAS has no links with and receives no funding from either tobacco or e-cigarette companies. Further information can be found at www.ukctas.net