

Dangers of 'reduced-harm' cigarettes

Smokers considering changing to so-called 'reduced harm' cigarettes should not conclude that these products are a less harmful alternative

Key messages

- There is no such thing as a safe cigarette, and no safe level of exposure to the carcinogens or other toxic substances contained in tobacco smoke.¹
- The current available evidence indicates that all smoked tobacco products are unacceptably harmful both to the smoker and to other people exposed to second-hand smoke. The very process of combustion means that it is inevitable that smoked tobacco creates toxins.²
- It is currently not possible to robustly and independently verify any claims by the tobacco industry that new cigarette products will be less harmful to smokers than any other cigarettes.
- Cigarettes produce an estimated 4,000 chemical compounds when they are smoked.³ This means that even if there were some reduction in harm to an individual smoker from using 'reduced harm' cigarettes – and this remains highly speculative – it would be likely to be marginal at best, and outweighed by an increase in harm caused by the impact of such claims on reducing smokers' motivation to quit.
- The mistaken belief that the health risks of smoking are reduced by using 'harm reduced' cigarettes is likely to increase the total damage caused by cigarettes across the population by reducing quit attempts, encouraging ex-smokers to resume smoking, and encouraging young people to start smoking.
- Based on the previous experience of claims about reduced harm made by the tobacco industry regarding filter tips and so-called 'light' and 'mild' cigarettes which have since been proved fraudulent⁴, there is good reason to doubt the validity of any new claims by the industry about 'reduced harm' cigarettes.
- There are no adequate mechanisms for Government to regulate the claims made by the tobacco companies about their products or the impact of these claims on the public, leaving the industry relatively free to communicate unsubstantiated, incomplete or inaccurate claims about properties of 'reduced harm' cigarettes or their consequential health impact.
- Smokers considering changing to so-called 'reduced harm' cigarettes should not conclude that these products are a less harmful alternative. Any possible reductions in harm for individuals from using such products instead of other cigarettes are unproven, and, even if proven, would be unlikely to be significant.^{5,6,7}

Recommendations

1. If it is possible to produce cigarettes that are independently verified to produce fewer toxins and carcinogens than those currently on the market, the Government should require that ALL cigarettes should be manufactured to that standard.
2. The tobacco industry, and those involved in the distribution or sale of tobacco, should not be permitted to make health or “reduced harm” claims in any communication or promotion.
3. The Government should establish a mechanism to ensure that any communication about cigarettes – including about their contents or emissions – is truthful, accurate, complete, balanced, relevant and in the public interest as far as can be measured against current evidence.

Background/discussion

What are the claims about ‘reduced-harm’ cigarettes?

It is claimed that tobacco companies have developed, or are in the process of developing, cigarettes that produce less harm than current cigarettes available.^{8,9} Such products are already available in some markets overseas, and there is currently nothing to stop the introduction of such cigarettes onto the Australian market.

These claims appear to be based on yields of some toxins when smoked by machines. However, we know that machine measurements of toxins and carcinogens do not accurately reflect smokers’ exposure to these toxins and carcinogens, as machines do not smoke cigarettes the way people do.^{10,11,12} These measures also do not accurately predict the harm to smokers of using the products. Before we could accept the tobacco industry claims, there needs to be independent testing of all the chemicals of concern, and their effects, using methods that reflect the way people (rather than machines) smoke.

Can there really be ‘reduced-harm’ cigarettes?

Since the 1950s, tobacco manufacturers have had a long history of denying that smoking is harmful or addictive, opposing or delaying all attempts to reduce usage, limit promotion, reduce exposure of non-smokers to second-hand smoke, or regulate the contents of cigarettes.¹³ The long history of deceptive industry conduct gives good grounds for a very high level of scepticism about any claims for reduced harm for any new product. From all that is known, the capacity to reduce the harmfulness of combusted tobacco is severely limited.^{14,15,16} In addition, there are good grounds for believing that these products may result in more, rather than less overall harm in the community.

There have been two major rounds of “innovation” in cigarette design and manufacture that the tobacco industry has claimed would reduce the harmful effects of smoking. The first was the introduction of filter tips in the 1950s. As filters made cigarettes easier for new smokers to smoke, and provided reassurance to existing smokers and led to less quitting, they probably did far more harm than good.

The second major innovation was the introduction of supposedly low yield (light or mild) brands from the 1960s. These were also promoted as being less dangerous, based on the lower yields of tar and carbon monoxide when smoked in the standard machine smoking test. These claims proved to be fraudulent - smokers receive the same amounts of toxins as the previous high yield cigarettes by modifying their smoking to smoke more deeply, take more puffs, and cover small ventilation holes designed to dilute the yield in machine tests.^{17,18,19} The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission recently concluded that the tobacco industry had behaved in misleading and deceptive ways in the marketing of these brands, and has accepted court enforceable undertakings from the three major companies to stop use of terms such as "light" and "mild".²⁰

So-called "reduced harm" cigarettes represent the third round of new products. We are deeply concerned that these products are no less harmful than other cigarettes and are simply a further attempt by manufacturers to discourage smokers from quitting, induce ex-smokers to start smoking again, and encourage young people to start smoking.

Several brands of cigarettes have been launched in the USA with a variety of claims of reduced exposure to harmful ingredients. Examples include:

- Quest – "low", "ultra low", or "nicotine-free"
- Omni – "Reduced carcinogens – Premium taste"
- Advance – "processing methods greatly reduce some cancer causing chemicals"
- Eclipse and Accord – These are cigarette-like products that have unique heat-based means of nicotine delivery.

While independent testing of such products has indicated that the products may give some reduction in exposure to some of the toxic substances, they may also deliver increased levels of other substances. For example, the Eclipse pseudo cigarette manufactured by the R.J. Reynolds company, produces more carbon monoxide than conventional cigarettes²¹ Also, as the methods of testing bear little relationship with actual human smoking patterns, the apparent reductions may not be real. Since there are an estimated 4,000 chemical compounds in tobacco smoke including more than 60 carcinogens and other toxic chemicals reduction in just some harmful constituents may not have any significant health benefit. Further, none of these products have gained much acceptance from smokers.

What controls are there on cigarettes?

Where there are regulatory provisions that could be applied to misleading or deceptive marketing by cigarette manufacturers, they are poorly placed to deal with challenges arising from industry claims about 'reduced harm' cigarettes. For example, while the Trade Practices Act provides for action to be taken against misleading or deceptive conduct, including in communicating claims about particular products, it cannot deal effectively with information that may give the public an incorrect impression or perception of a product but where the conduct of the provider of the information is not directly misleading or deceptive. For example, there is the potential that communications about 'reduced constituents', 'reduced delivery' or 'reduced emissions' while technically accurate, will lead to inaccurate implications of reduced harm for smokers. In reality, the reduced delivery of a certain substance may be inconsequential to health or the same product may deliver more of another more toxic substance.^{22,23,24,25}

The current provisions to regulate communications about products are inadequate to protect public health. The tobacco industry has a vested interest in communicating about its products in a way which will increase use of cigarettes and decrease quitting. Yet the question of whether or not certain cigarettes are less harmful is complex, requiring evidence from a combination of toxicological and long-term epidemiological and clinical study. Due to the nature of marketing and promotional communications, it is unlikely that a thorough and balanced representation of the facts would be presented.

Protecting consumers and public health

Given the history of fraudulent and deceptive claims by the tobacco industry, the risks arising from inaccurate communications about 'harm reduced' cigarettes and the complexity of the issue of 'harm reduced' cigarettes, there is a strong case for Government regulation to protect consumers and public health in light of emerging claims from the industry of 'harm reduced' cigarettes.

There is a need to protect the public from commercially motivated communication about cigarettes and their claimed properties. Information about products to be communicated to the public must be truthful, accurate, complete, balanced, relevant and in the public interest, as measured against the best available evidence. This can only realistically be achieved if the industry is prohibited from commercial communication about products, including any claims about reduced harm.

If the tobacco industry claims about reduced harm cigarettes can be independently verified, then the Government should immediately regulate to require that all cigarettes produced and marketed meet the lowest standard of harm that is technologically feasible. This would eliminate the use of reduced harm claims as a marketing tool for brand or product differentiation, and ensure that any genuine reductions in harmfulness would be received all smokers.

The Government should also regulate the contents of manufactured cigarettes to require full disclosure of chemical constituents and emissions and prohibit the use of any ingredients, additives or design features that make cigarettes more addictive or more palatable, or which mask or give misleading cues about the toxicity of the cigarette.

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