E-cigarettes: does the new emperor of tobacco harm reduction have any clothes?

Gerry Stimson chides the health and medical communities for what he sees as deplorable lack of leadership in embracing and supporting the rising popularity of electronic cigarettes as a harm reduction tool. He thinks a lot of this has to do with those who have worked all their professional lives in tobacco control feeling blindsided by a disruptive technology that we had nothing to do with. We are apparently so gracelessly self-absorbed and small-minded in maintaining support for the glacial pace of our woefully inept suite of comprehensive tobacco control policies (now embraced by a mere 178 nations via the World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control), that we need to ‘soberly reflect’ on our myopia and sound the trumpets for a driver of cessation and harm reduction of such promise that the world has never seen.

His essay has a lot to say about the dramatic rise in ‘popularity’ of e-cigarettes and their promise in turbo-charging smoking cessation. However, amazingly, it is silent about the two core premises of that promise: the claims that e-cigarettes greatly improve the odds of successfully quitting compared with either unassisted cessation or using pharmaceutical aids like nicotine replacement therapy; and the apparently self-evident truth that reducing daily cigarette consumption by vaping while also continuing to smoke will reduce the risk of disease and early death.

Let us take cessation first. Stimson and other vaping advocates valorize the emergence of the vaping ‘community’ as a kind of self-help movement of chemical hobbyists trying to reduce health risk. The blogosphere and social media that impress Stimson are frothing with excitement from former smokers celebrating the end of smoking in their lives, thanks to e-cigarettes. But it is wise to reflect that these online communities are a self-selecting example of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK.

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