The potential role of snus products within a tobacco harm reduction strategy

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Gilmore et al. review ‘The place for harm reduction and product regulation in UK tobacco control policy’, including the challenges around smokeless tobacco products, such as Swedish-style snus, playing a potential role in a tobacco harm reduction strategy driven by the public health community.

On the basis of a thorough review of available literature, the authors agree on the potential for smokeless tobacco products, such as Swedish-style snus, to provide a net public health benefit as being an overall reduced risk alternative to cigarette smoking and yet argue against there being a legitimate place for such products in tobacco harm reduction strategy in the near future. This contradiction is difficult to understand given findings from reviews of ‘the Swedish experience’ and the potential net public health benefit of providing an option of reduced risk tobacco products like snus to informed adult consumers.

We believe that the aims of the public health community’s agenda for tobacco harm reduction would be best served if there is consultation on how best to achieve these aims with all relevant stakeholders, including tobacco manufacturers and their consumers. For example, recent constructive developments in the field of harm reduction regarding the food industry in various markets have included the public health community seeking, and receiving, collaborative support from that industry—from fast food chains abandoning the use of trans-fat oil—to supermarkets labelling food items based on guideline daily amount. Similarly, we think that responsible tobacco companies should be allowed to explore their legitimate role in the wider tobacco harm reduction context and given space to innovate consumer acceptable reduced risk products.

Harm reduction is an important element of British American Tobacco’s strategy. We tripled R&D investment in the last 5 years, focusing on the research and development of potential reduced exposure products and new product categories such as Swedish-style snus. Swedish-style snus, once established as a product category in a new market, is likely to be comparably as profitable as the cigarette business based on data from current established markets such as the USA and Sweden.

For tobacco harm reduction to work, there is a fundamental need for reduced risk products to be a viable alternative to cigarettes in the eyes of the consumers. To begin to understand tobacco consumer preferences in markets where smokeless tobacco products are an unfamiliar category, we completed a limited consumer trial of snus in Japan in 2007, and we are currently test marketing snus in Canada and South Africa (two large markets where British American Tobacco has leadership in the cigarette category). We will be carrying out post-marketing surveillance and wish to share resulting data with the public health community.

Finally, the authors consider the possible establishment of a nicotine product regulatory authority for the UK. In our view, regulatory frameworks drawn up through a consultative and collaborative process involving all stakeholders can best achieve government and public health objectives, while incentivizing industry innovation in developing and bringing to market consumer acceptable reduced risk products.

Competing interests

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References


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The public health agenda will never be best served through consultation with the tobacco industry. Indeed, it has long been clear that tobacco control is antithetical to the economic interests of the tobacco industry. British American Tobacco’s (BAT) extensive efforts to undermine effective tobacco control policies are well documented and its letter1 should be interpreted as just that—an attempt to undermine the case for nicotine product regulation because it represents a threat to the industry. In other words, our proposals pass the ‘scream test’ by alarming the industry sufficiently to warrant a response.

In addition to making dirty nicotine products, cigarettes, less available and affordable, we propose making clean nicotine delivery products, medicinal nicotine, more available and affordable.2 BAT’s documents show that they see this as a threat. As early as 1992, for example, BAT was discussing whether the then new, transdermal nicotine patch would be a threat, concluding that ‘such threat would grow dramatically if the product would become available over-the-counter’,3 the very thing we are proposing.

We are not, as BAT indirectly and misleadingly suggest, advocating the inclusion of snus or other smokeless tobaccos within a harm reduction model. Our paper discusses at length the potential dangers of such an approach, noting in particular that the industry has much to benefit from selling smokeless tobacco in markets with restrictions on public smoking. We call for a radical overhaul of nicotine regulation to ensure that market freedoms and incentives are used to maximize public health, not tobacco industry profits.

One of the objectives of this new he regulatory framework would be to severely curtail the industry’s ability to freely sell a product that kills one in two users. BAT’s plea for participation in developing the regulatory framework is intended to jeopardize it. Given the industry’s interests and past history, including its manipulation of cigarette chemistry to encourage nicotine freebasing and increase addiction4 and to sabotage effective policies, the suggestion that it play a role in regulating nicotine is laughable.

References

1 BAT letter to JPH.