

The Future Of Tobacco Control Legislation, Smokeless Tobacco, And 'Safer' Cigarettes

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The main thrust of tobacco control legislation is to reduce the harm done by smoking.

This has led to health warnings, smoking bans and advertising restrictions.

It has also led to compulsory filters and legislation to reduce tar. Short of banning the manufacture of cigarettes, where else will it lead and what product will tobacco consumers be buying in 2050?

Projecting trends forward, it is inevitable that government legislation which has changed the cigarette from an initially high tar product with no filter tip will change it further by insisting on progressive reductions in the toxins produced by burning tobacco.

Ultimately, health standards applied to tobacco smoke may become so rigorous that the industry might take the path away from burning to other means of delivering nicotine to tobacco users.

This might mean a move from cigarettes, cigars, fine cut tobacco for roll-your-own (RYO), and coarse cut tobacco for pipes and hookahs to smokeless tobacco.

In this scenario, moist snuff products taken orally – American style 'dip' and Swedish-style snus, would become the primary tobacco product. This is not impossible: in Sweden there are more snus users than there are cigarette smokers, even though cigarettes remain the more valuable market.

In the US, the volume of moist snuff usage has been growing by about 7% per annum while cigarettes have been contracting by 2-3%, although, here too, cigarettes remain by far the larger market.

Smokeless obstacles

However there are a number of obstacles to oral moist snuff becoming the primary tobacco product in years to come. First the product must be perceived both by regulators and users as being a less harmful product than cigarettes. Since the product does not contain the carcinogenic nitrosamines which are found in tobacco smoke this might have seemed a safe bet.

However, the sale of oral moist snuff is banned on health grounds in every country in the EU, with the exception of Sweden, because of WHO research suggesting a connection between the product and oral cancer.

This means, in effect, that the EU perceives moist snuff as more dangerous than the cigarette since the sale of cigarettes is not banned in the EU.

Sweden disputes the WHO research and is actively trying to overturn the EU ban. However, even if Sweden is successful, the situation will remain that no health authority has ever explicitly stated that one tobacco product is 'safer' than another.

Another problem for smokeless tobacco being the future of the tobacco industry is that it does not have a tradition of use in the vast majority of countries, and tobacco culture and product familiarity remain important among consumers of these products.

The cigarette, with its iconic shape, accounts for well over 90% of the tobacco products market and for better or for worse is part of consumer consciousness.

Quest for a 'safer' cigarette

So the argument returns to the quest for a 'safer' cigarette, for a cigarette-shaped tobacco product which health authorities accept is less harmful to health than today's cigarette.

One possible step is a cigarette which does not contain the products of tobacco combustion. There are a number of ways in which this might be achieved.

First is the idea of heating rather than burning tobacco in the cigarette by electronic means. Alternatively the cigarette might contain snuff tobacco like the current Japan Tobacco product ZeroStyle Mint where heating is not required.

Another idea is a cigarette shaped product which does not contain tobacco but nicotine in a liquid form which is turned

into a vapour by means of a battery. This is the e-cigarette.

Whether a combination of the imposition by governments of more rigorous emission standards and new smokeless cigarette product development will produce a product capable of replacing the smoke-generating cigarette is a matter of conjecture but the success of such a product would also require the branding and marketing strength of the global companies.

And one more element would be required for such an industry sea change: some degree of acceptance by regulatory authorities that a less harmful alternative to the conventional cigarette would also be required.

Another factor affecting the future of reduced harm tobacco products, or non tobacco nicotine delivery products could be changes to the rules applied to the NRT products produced by pharmaceutical companies to allow these products to compete with cigarettes on a level playing field.

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