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Inside

Page 2

Tobacco control approach fundamentally flawed

Page 3

Despite data, WHO's war on tobacco alternatives continues

Page 4

Dirty ashtray award for WHO!

E-cig industry association sues Spanish government over anti-vaping campaign

Vaping helped me quit smoking

WHO decides tobacco harm reduction talks can wait until 2023

By Alex Norcia

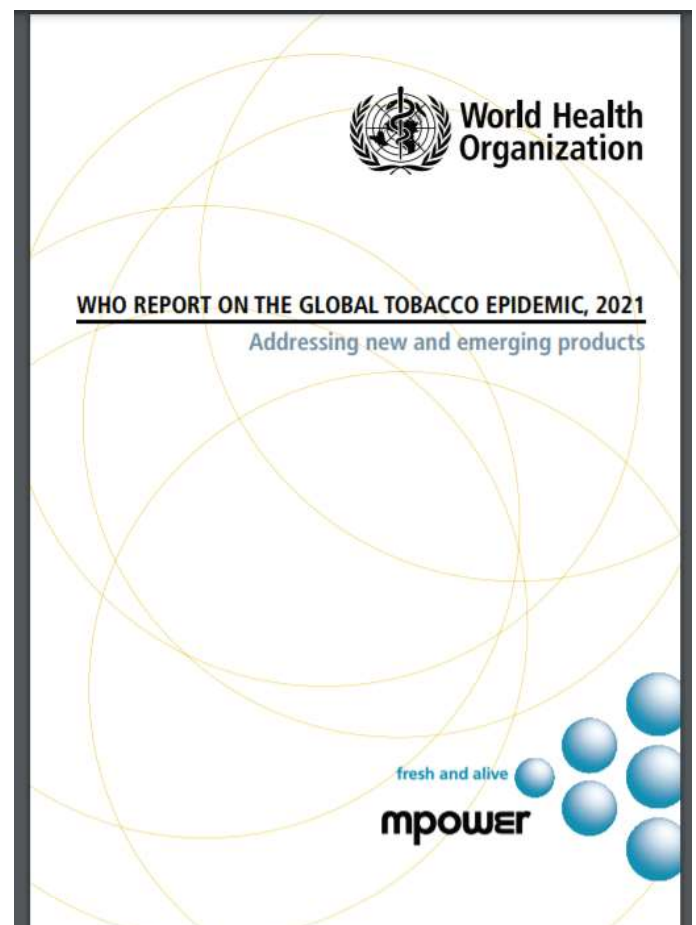
Despite 8 million annual smoking-related deaths, the World Health Organization (WHO) seems to have decided that it doesn't have to deal with safer nicotine alternatives until 2023.

On August 5, the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) released an annotated provisional agenda for COP9—its upcoming, virtual conference of the 182 parties that make up the convention. COP is held every two years.

"The Bureau decided that the reports prepared by WHO (Comprehensive report on research and evidence on novel and emerging tobacco products, contained in document FCTC/COP/9/9) and by the Convention Secretariat (Challenges posed by and classification of novel and emerging tobacco products, contained in document FCTC/COP/9/10), should be presented for information and that related substantive discussions should be deferred to COP10 [in 2023]," the provisional agenda reads (emphasis my own).

That bureaucratic jargon essentially suggests that the WHO can continue to do what it's been doing: brushing aside mounting evidence that vaping is much less harmful than smoking.

Of course, none of this is shocking. The WHO has long been sitting far up in the bleachers, cheering on one team: the prohibitionists. The agency appears dead set on a perpetual campaign of ignorance, delaying open debate as many governments stay confused and hostile toward vaping



and other low-risk nicotine alternatives.

"Whether it's their incompetence or by design, the FCTC Secretariat seems intent on ensuring that 8 million or more people per annum will continue to die," Dr. Marewa Glover, the director of the independent Centre of Research Excellence: Indigenous Sovereignty & Smoking (COREISS) in Auckland, New Zealand, told Filter.

The WHO has taken an anti-THR stance time and time and time again, seemingly refusing to incorporate “harm reduction strategies” into its policy, even though it’s included in the agency’s definition of “tobacco control.” This approach generally entails the organization pushing for regulations that will end up destroying less-dangerous alternatives to smoking—particularly in low- and middle-income countries whose governments are more susceptible to the whims of foreign billionaires, and where a majority of the world’s smokers live.

Dr. Charles Gardner, the executive director of INNCO, a global nonprofit that supports the rights and well-being of adults who use safer nicotine, laments that his organization has still never been able to attend the conference, even as observers.

“We are trying to raise public attention to the fact that this system is broken,” Gardner told Filter. “We, the very people who are affected by recommendations that come out of these events, have no voice. We are denied a seat at the table, on the assumption that we are biased, while NGOs that are clearly biased against tobacco harm reduction, and countries with state-owned tobacco companies, are both welcomed with open arms in FCTC debates and decisions.” Most recently, in late July, the WHO put out its eighth report on the global tobacco “epidemic” and emphasized the “need to tackle threats posed by new nicotine and tobacco products.” Immediately, THR proponents lambasted the position, in no small part because it was funded by

Bloomberg Philanthropies, which is seen as a well-financed, trenchant group that pushes nothing but prohibitionist policies.

A lot will happen between now and 2023. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has signaled that it will finally issue decisions on premarket tobacco applications for at least the major vape manufacturers by September 9, and it’s largely expected that they will be approved in some capacity, with the designation of being “appropriate for the protection of public health.” Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the government has unveiled a plan for the country to be smoke-free by 2030, and has embraced vaping and other low-risk nicotine options—so much so that Philip Morris International (PMI) recently announced it intends to stop selling cigarettes in the nation within the next decade.

Yet, as the WHO sticks to its anti-vaping pronouncements, more and more lower- and middle-income countries will surely ban the sale of vaping products.

“Whatever the timetable, we can rely on WHO to produce anti-vaping propaganda and push for vaping prohibition at every COP, casually and carelessly putting millions of lives at risk,” Clive Bates, a tobacco control expert and former director of Action on Smoking and Health (UK), told Filter. “The problem isn’t what goes into the meeting agenda, but the fact that WHO actually wants to ban vaping while cigarettes are available everywhere.”

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Tobacco control approach fundamentally flawed

Termining the tobacco control approach of the World Health Organization fundamentally flawed, President of the Foundation for Smoke-Free World Dr Derek Yach has said no meaningful progress has been made on tobacco consumption in the last 20 years.

“The WHO’s tobacco control approach is fundamentally flawed. In 20 years, they have simply failed to make any meaningful progress to reduce tobacco consumption, with over 1bn tobacco users today and 8m people dying annually from tobacco-related illnesses,” he said in response to the WHO’s report on tobacco pandemic. The report was released on 27 July 2021.

In its report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2021 – Addressing new and emerging products, WHO said it has for the first time included data on electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS). The report maintains that ENDS are addictive and not without harm and called for strictly regulating them “for maximum protection of public health”. The report also claimed that children and adolescents who use ENDS can double their risk of smoking cigarettes.

Dr Yach held WHO and its Bloomberg partners for focusing on rhetoric than action.

“The slowing decline in use of combustible cigarettes is a serious indictment of the organisation and their Bloomberg partners who have been focused on excessive rhetoric as opposed to action, undermining true progress.”

He added that effective tax policies promoted as reduction mechanisms have lagged behind in developing countries.

“Favoured consumption reduction mechanisms, such as effective tax policies, have badly lagged in most developing nations.” He added there has been a massive failure to help smokers in these countries quit, with doctors rarely engaged and nicotine replacement therapies not available. This despite over \$1bn being invested by Bloomberg in these countries.

However, he added that the next generation devices for THR provide a real opportunity to end combustible smoking.

“The exceptional growth of next generation devices offers the WHO a real opportunity to tackle combustible consumption once and for all. Over 100 million ex-smokers use reduced risk products and the WHO should be taking advantage of massive investment in the sector by encouraging governments to provide an incentivised regulatory framework to enable greater expansion.”

He urged the WHO “to show some pragmatism and get serious on harm reduction strategies, as health systems play catch up from the pandemic, it is now.”



Despite data, WHO's war on tobacco alternatives continues

By Lindsey Stroud

Paid in part by Michael R. Bloomberg's billions and U.S. taxpayers, the WHO has officially denounced e-cigarettes and vapor products. In a mystifyingly misleading report published July 27, the WHO has demonized e-cigarettes, urging governments to "strictly regulate" the newfangled disruptive technologies, dismissing (if not ignoring) the very notion and science of tobacco harm reduction. Not that anyone is surprised.

Despite mounting scientific evidence in support of these products, in 2019 the Secretariat for the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control urged member parties "to remain vigilant towards" novel tobacco harm reduction products, including e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, declaring vaping as a "treacherous ... public health disaster."

This latest report is full of both alarmism and misleading information. Just six pages in and the WHO purports "[c]hildren and adolescents who use [e-cigarettes] can double their risk of smoking cigarettes." There is zero evidence to support this. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States, smoking rates among young adults are at their lowest levels with 11.9 percent of American adult smokers being between 18 to 24 years old in 2019. Conversely, in 2009, 22.5% of smokers were young adults.

The report also fails to acknowledge harm reduction. In 212 pages, "harm reduction" is mentioned a total of four times and when mentioned, the WHO paints a picture that tobacco companies are using the concept to promote the use of their products and such marketing is "undermining successful tobacco control initiatives."

If tobacco control measures were effective, smokers would not have developed the modern electronic cigarette. In its report, the WHO acknowledges that e-cigarettes "were first developed by companies independent of the tobacco industry," but now, tobacco companies have entered the market. Well, why shouldn't they? Manufacturers should be able to market less harmful alternatives that help smokers quit combustible cigarettes. More importantly, a case could be made that the tobacco companies should be mandated to produce reduced-harm products (even though any government mandate is problematic). The WHO is the same organization that seeks to reduce harm in road accidents by pushing for automobile manufacturing standards. This approach should be applied to tobacco.

Damningly, the report disregards the vast array of evidence of e-cigarettes' reduced harm and their ability to help adults quit smoking and remain smoke-free. For example, the WHO points out that the U.S. surgeon general has found "inadequate" information to determine if e-cigarettes "increase smoking cessation."

The organization should stick to the Royal College of Physicians' (RCP) findings. While the U.S. surgeon general is an esteemed office, its own 1964 report on tobacco's ill effects came exactly two years after the RCP 1962 report which "highlighted the link between smoking and lung cancer" and other health issues. In 2016, the RCP found e-cigarettes "unlikely to exceed 5 percent of the harm from smoking tobacco." In the autumn of 2019, and in the wake of the spat of vaping-related lung injuries in the U.S., the agency reiterated that vaping is "far less harmful than smoking tobacco," and urged users to only buy from "mainstream suppliers who are selling regulated products."

Interestingly, while the WHO has proposed countries

ought to ban the sale of e-cigarettes, they remain steadfast in protecting the sale of much harmful combustible cigarettes by urging countries to not only raise excise taxes on cigarettes, as well as raising these taxes "significantly and periodically." The WHO claims that tax increases on tobacco products "is the single most effective tobacco control

measures" and that cigarette tax increases "can fund expanded government health programs." Further, the WHO recommends countries strengthen both administration and enforcement of tobacco taxes.

Not only was the report "supported by a grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies," but for some odd reason it "should not be regarded as reflecting the position of Bloomberg Philanthropies," yet the report reads like a Christmas-in-July wish list for a Bloomberg-created anti-tobacco regime.

Prior to becoming a so-called philanthropic autocrat, Bloomberg was mayor of New York City, where he launched an anti-tobacco crusade upon first entering office. By the end of 2002 (after being elected in 2001), Bloomberg's administration banned smoking both in public places, including bars and restaurants, as well as increased the city's cigarette tax. This made the Big Apple home to the U.S.'s highest cigarette prices. In late 2019, on top of the \$1 billion Bloomberg had already donated to anti-tobacco groups and efforts, the former mayor announced a \$160 million campaign to "fight flavored e-cigarettes."

The WHO has officially launched a war on tobacco harm reduction, but this report is not really a report, and rather, reads like a Bloomberg-penned memo endorsing his nanny state policy "solutions" and applying them to the world. Ultimately, the real winners are cigarettes as the WHO continues to recommend governments rely on cigarette taxes, while simultaneously block adult access to tobacco harm reduction.



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Dirty ashtray award for WHO!



The Framework Convention Alliance, an alliance of 300 organizations in 100, gives the Dirty Ashtray and Orchid awards to countries obstructing or promoting effective measures in the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Created in 1999 and established in 2003, FCA's awards became a center of keen interest as and when countries met to discuss tobacco control. It became a regular feature of the Conference of Parties. Since 2000, these awards have been regularly distributed. A reason is also given why the country, individual, or an organization has been given the Orchid or the Dirty Ashtray award. On 18 October 2000, Uganda was given the Orchid Award for refusing the tobacco industry money while tobacco industry and the Marketing Board of Zimbabwe got the Dirty Ashtray Award for pretending to "be part of the Zimbabwe delegation".

One wonders if today WHO deserves the Dirty Ashtray Award. The reason is the WHO's report on tobacco pandemic, paid for by Bloomberg Philanthropies and partially written by people outside the WHO who belong to organizations funded by Mr Bloomberg who runs a crusade against any form of Tobacco Harm Reduction (THR).

According to INNCO, vaping devices, snus, and nicotine pouches are effective ways for people who use nicotine to protect themselves and bystanders against tobacco smoke. As stated in FCTC Art. 8.1, tobacco smoke is the real enemy. Therefore, the provisions in Art. 8.2 should push the FCTC Parties to embrace THR, not to fight it.

But since the conception of the FCTC, Bloomberg linked groups constantly pushed their most extremist views to drive a shift from "smoke-free" to "tobacco-free" and now to "nicotine-free" while 1.1 billion people worldwide are still smoking.

E-cig industry association sues Spanish government over anti-vaping campaign

Spain's e-cigarette industry has launched legal action against the central government, claiming a long-running anti-vaping campaign is against the law on several counts.

The lawsuit, started by the Union of Vaping Promoters and Entrepreneurs (Unión de Promotores y Empresarios del Vapeo, UPEV), claims the Ministry of Health campaign "El tabaco ata y te mata" ("Tobacco ties and kills you") violates several articles of the Spanish General Law of Advertising and the Law of Publicity and Institutional Communication.

According to the UPEV, the campaign – launched in 2019 and still continuing – "identifies vaping and smoking tobacco in a manifestly misleading way, putting both activities on the same level and attributing the same harmful effects to them".

The association is demanding immediate cancellation of the campaign, which has been promoted in a variety of media including on websites, social media, television and radio.

In its submission to the court, the UPEV has presented a technical and scientific report that shows the benefits of vaping as a smoking cessation tool.

The union has blamed the government campaign to discourage vaping for the closure of about 40 shops in 2019, with the loss of 400 jobs, and last year took its complaint to the Spanish Ombudsman.

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Vaping helped me quit smoking

E-cigarettes
Current evidence

Are E-cigs safe?
E-cigarettes are significantly less harmful (95%) to health than smoking tobacco

Kashif Khan, 32, started smoking in 2008. Ten years later, he decided to quit smoking after shortness of breath and mucus in lungs. For this, he started vaping in 2018 on his brother's advice. He successfully quit smoking in six months after starting vaping.

"Vaping helped me in giving up smoking," Khan told Alternative Research Initiative (ARI), on phone as he leads a vape outlet on the University Road in Peshawar. "Now, I use vaping in reduced level."

When he started smoking in 2008, Khan would consume around 25 cigarettes a day. As a user of foreign brand, he was spending around Rs5000 a month.

Khan came to know about vaping when his brother recommended this alternative for giving up smoking. He added that he started after he came to know that it was 95% safer than combustible cigarettes. When Khan started vaping, his consumption of cigarettes dropped down to two to three per day. "I did not remain a dual user for long."

Established in 2018, ARI is an initiative aimed at filling gaps in research and advocacy on ending combustible smoking in a generation. Supported by the Foundation for A Smoke-Free World (FSFW), ARI established the Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR) in 2019 to promote innovative solutions for smoking cessation.

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