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Switching to vaping for better health

By Junaid Ali Khan

Ahsan Mustafa, 36, started smoking in 2007. He used to smoke 15 cigarettes a day. Six months back he found vaping as a possible solution to quit combustible smoking.

"Vaping helped me in giving up smoking," Mustafa told Alternative Research Initiative (ARI), at a vape store in F-11 Markaz, Islamabad.

With nearly 29 million smokers, Pakistan is considered one of the top 15 countries with a heavy burden of diseases because of combustible smoking. The total cost of all smoking attributable to diseases and deaths in Pakistan was 3.85 billion dollars in 2019.

In February 2022, Mustafa reluctantly decided to try vaping in his efforts to give up smoking. Initially he thought that vaping was a gateway to smoking. However, one of his friends introduced him to e-cigarette. "I knew quitting is not easy. I decided to give vaping a try."

Today, Pakistan has around 120 vaping outlets in the major cities' upscale localities. Legally imported, e-cigarettes are being used in a regulatory vacuum. According to a KAP study conducted by ARI, friends are the main source of introduction on vaping in Pakistan. Importantly, the smokers who switch to vaping do not consult a doctor.

Mustafa recalls that as he could not give up smoking, he was worried about the health problems. "I suffered from pyrosis (heartburn), headache and coughing bouts." He was spending Rs4000 on smoking every month.

He said he did not become a dual user of smoking and vaping, adding that some smokers try vaping for fun as they continue to smoke. As he shifted to vaping, he started feeling the positive effects. "No headaches, no tiredness and no feeling of vomiting."

That is why, he said in the last five or six months, he has not touched a combustible cigarette. He has started to decrease the level of nicotine in his vaping. "My nicotine use has dropped from 20mg to 16mg."



Currently there is no law in Pakistan on the level of nicotine in the vaping. In the UK, according to NHS, e-cigarettes are tightly regulated for safety and quality. The law restricts e-cigarette tanks to a capacity of no more than 2ml, with maximum volume of nicotine-containing e-liquid for sale in one refill container to 10ml, and e-liquids to a nicotine strength of no more than 20mg/ml.

NHS says e-cigarettes do not produce tar or carbon monoxide, two of the most harmful elements in tobacco smoke. It adds that nicotine is the addictive substance in cigarettes, it's relatively harmless. "Almost all of the harm from smoking comes from the thousands of other chemicals in tobacco smoke, many of which are toxic."

When asked about the high prices of vaping devices and juices in Pakistan, Ahsan maintained that in the long run, they prove to be cheaper.

Most of the smokers, he said want to quit smoking but are unable to because of lack of effective smoking cessation services.

Six months on after shifting to vaping, he thinks it can help adult smokers in quitting smoking.

Nicotine reduction in cigarettes can save millions of lives

By Jonathan Foulds

The cigarette is the only legal consumer product that – when used as intended – causes the premature death of half of long-term users.

To address this long-standing health threat, in late June 2022, the Biden-Harris administration announced a plan to move forward with a new standard for cigarettes and other combustible tobacco products that would make them minimally or nonaddictive.

The Biden-Harris proposal was predated by an earlier plan in 2017 during Trump's presidency to reduce the permissible nicotine content in cigarettes. Mitch Zeller, the director of the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products from 2013 to April 2022, stated in 2019 that "this one rule could have the greatest impact on public health in the history of public health."

So, what does the proposal mean in practice? When implemented – likely not for at least another three years – it would mean that all cigarettes and cigars sold in the United States will have to contain approximately 95% less nicotine than they currently do. As nicotine is the addictive substance in tobacco, this would mean that these tobacco products would become pretty much nonaddictive. No more young people would become addicted to cigarettes and current smokers would find it much easier to quit.

As a professor of public health sciences who has been doing research on smoking cessation for over 30 years, I am impressed by any intervention that increases the quit rate among smokers with no plans to quit. In one of our recent randomized clinical trials of very low-nicotine cigarettes, my research team at Penn State, along with colleagues at Harvard, found that those assigned to use them were more than four times as likely to quit smoking as those who smoked normal nicotine cigarettes. Research suggests that the full public health benefits of a successfully implemented reduced nicotine standard for cigarettes could be enormous.

A 2018 FDA study projected that by the year 2060, a reduced nicotine standard for cigarettes could reduce the smoking rate dramatically – from around 13% now to below 2%, preventing 16 million people from becoming regular smokers and preventing more than 2.8 million tobacco-caused deaths.

The proposed standard would not simply result in something akin to a "light" cigarette. Light cigarettes, which have been marketed for decades, contain about the same amount of nicotine as regular cigarettes – about 10 to 15 milligrams per cigarette. To comply with the new standard, a cigarette will likely be required to contain less than 0.5 milligrams of nicotine. So-called "light" or "low-tar" cigarettes have tiny holes in the filter that allow air flow into the filter to dilute the smoke. When smoked by a machine, light cigarettes deliver lower levels of tar and nicotine per puff. However, when held by a human, the holes are often blocked by the fingers, and smokers can easily puff a bit harder to inhale the same amount of nicotine and tar. Some skeptics of the proposed nicotine reductions have raised the concern that smokers might just smoke reduced-nicotine-content cigarettes more intensely, as they do with "light" cigarettes. However, dozens of research studies have shown that with very low-nicotine-content cigarettes, smokers do not increase their smoke intake.

Instead, over a short period of time, smokers learn that the very low-nicotine cigarette is not very satisfying, and they gradually reduce their smoking. In randomized trials, those using very low-nicotine-content cigarettes are also more likely to quit.

When nicotine reduction in cigarettes was initially proposed under the Trump administration, Zeller and former FDA director Scott Gottlieb recognized that one of the main challenges to the success of this plan was the possibility that the regulation might give rise to an illicit market for high-nicotine cigarettes.

Zeller and Gottlieb understood that one critical way to keep that from happening is to allow non smoked nicotine products – like electronic cigarettes – to remain on the market. E-cigarettes deliver a satisfying amount of nicotine for smokers while exposing the user to significantly lower amounts of toxic substances than regular cigarettes. As a result, e-cigarettes are likely to be significantly less harmful.

New research by our team, along with colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University, recently found that when smokers with no plans to quit use electronic cigarettes with cigarette-like nicotine delivery, a greater proportion completely quit smoking than those using zero-nicotine e-cigarettes or no e-cigarette. The potential for e-cigarettes to help replace smoking explains why it came as a surprise to many when – two days after the Biden-Harris announcement in June to drastically reduce the permissible nicotine content in cigarettes – the FDA then announced that it was effectively banning all sales of Juul, the enormously popular e-cigarette that has been the biggest selling e-cigarette brand over the past five years. When Juul appealed the decision, the FDA suspended the denial order until an additional review is completed, which is expected to take months.

And Juul is not the only e-cigarette to be threatened with a ban. Of the millions of e-cigarette applications submitted to the FDA by the deadline in September 2020, more than 99% have been denied.

The reason the FDA's e-cigarette ban is so puzzling and counter-intuitive in the context of the FDA's nicotine-reduction efforts in cigarettes is that the availability of e-cigarettes is critical to the feasibility of that plan. Many researchers, including me, believe that having a variety of legal, regulated high-nicotine e-cigarettes on the market is a critical element in reducing consumer demand for illegal high-nicotine smoked products.

Health authorities in other parts of the world, including the United Kingdom and New Zealand, have recognized the important role that e-cigarettes can play in reducing cigarette smoking. New Zealand's nicotine-reduction plan explicitly includes providing access to alternative nicotine products like e-cigarettes.

Research shows that e-cigarettes are much less harmful than cigarettes, and they are proved to help smokers transition from highly toxic cigarettes. It is therefore highly likely to be appropriate for the protection of public health to keep a variety of e-cigarette brands on the market until after the nicotine reduction plan for cigarettes has been successfully implemented.

As we pass World Lung Cancer Day, quietly as usual, I believe we now have a plan that could do more than anything else to reduce the number of deaths each year from that horrible disease. It is a plan that has been proposed by Republican and Democratic administrations alike and is supported by the best available science. In my view, implementation of a reduced-nicotine standard for combustible tobacco represents the possibility of finally bringing an end to cigarette addiction within our lifetimes.

<https://www.yahoo.com/video/us-government-call-deep-nicotine-122107333.html>

Tax relief of billions for smokers

ISLAMABAD: Contrary to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's instructions and the main coalition partner's lobbying for increase in taxes on smoking, the government has quietly given billions of rupees in tax relief by increasing the taxable price threshold for the expensive cigarette brands.

The change was made on the eve of approval of the budget by the National Assembly, which also eroded the benefits that the government wanted to earn by slightly increasing the federal excise duty on cigarettes.

A government that could not stand before the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to protect the salaried class from the additional tax burden changed the taxable price slabs to keep smoking affordable. The change was not made on June 10 aimed at avoiding public debate on the issue.

The government has increased the threshold for higher duties on the expensive cigarette brands, according to the Finance Act 2022 that was enforced from July 1.

Before the budget, the government was charging excise duty of Rs5,200 per 1,000 cigarettes, if the printed retail price was over Rs5,960 per 1,000 sticks.

In the budget, the government increased the excise duty by Rs700 or 13.5% to Rs5,900 per 1,000 cigarettes for the expensive brands. The per cigarette additional tax impact is only 70 paisa.

However, in order to offset the impact and also bring a few expensive brands in the lower tax slab, the government also increased the taxable threshold for the upper brand cigarettes from the printed price of Rs5,960 per 1,000 sticks to Rs6,660 – a benefit of Rs700 on every 1,000 cigarettes. Had the government not increased the upper brands' taxable price limit, many brands that now fall in the low tax tier would have been shifted to the upper tier. This might have discouraged smoking in the country.

Before the budget, the FED on the locally produced cigarettes with a retail price of less than Rs5,960 per 1,000 cigarettes was Rs1,650 that in the budget was increased to Rs1,850.

This amounts to additional tax of a mere 20 paisa per cigarette. The threshold to determine the low tax rate was up to Rs5,960, which has also now gone up to Rs6,660.

After the change in the taxable price slab, a few brands that were earlier taxed at a reduced rate of Rs5,200 would now be charged a tax of Rs1,850 per 1,000 sticks.

"The government has tricked with the people who advocated increasing the tax burden to discourage smoking," said Dr Ziauddin, Country Lead on Tobacco Control, Vital Strategies. He argued that after the increase in the taxable slab limit, the smoking prevalence would increase, which would also significantly push up the cost of illness.

As many as 31 million adults (age 15+) or about one-fifth of the total adults currently use tobacco, according to Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC). It added tobacco use is the leading cause of death due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and cardiovascular disease.

Due to unchanged and low tobacco taxes, Pakistan ranks among the worst-performing countries in the Tobacconomics Cigarette Tax Scorecard that evaluates the strength of tax systems, with an overall tax system score of less than one on a five-point scale.

According to SPDC estimates, more than 260,000 people will



start smoking in Pakistan, if tobacco taxes are not raised in 2022-23, while around 150,000 die every year due to smoking related diseases. While chairing a cabinet meeting on new budget proposals on June 10th, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had showed his dissatisfaction with the proposed increase in FED rates and sought that the taxation burden should be further increased by Rs25 billion in the new fiscal year.

However, the changes in the taxable price slabs would not help achieving this objective.

Finance Minister Miftah Ismail had also assured the Pakistan Peoples Party - the main coalition partner - that he would make sure that the tobacco sector will pay Rs225 billion in taxes as against Rs150 billion in the just ended fiscal year. This promise may also remain unfulfilled.

Federal Water Resources Minister Khursheed Shah had said on the floor of the House that Pakistan was among the countries having lowest tax on cigarettes, which was not only reducing revenue but also putting people's health at stake.

The SPDC research showed that poor households in Pakistan spend a larger proportion of their budget on tobacco than rich households, resulting in less spending on basic needs. According to SPDC estimates based on IMF projections, approximately 4% of per capita income was required to purchase 2,000 cigarettes in 2020-21, which would decrease to 3.6% in 2021-22 and further decrease to 3.2% in 2022-23 if cigarette prices do not rise.

The low-taxed cigarettes represent the majority of the market, about 88%, the average excise tax share is nearly 45% of the retail price, which is significantly lower than the widely accepted benchmark of 70% of the retail price.

Tobacco is not the only sector that has been given billions of rupees tax benefits. The government has also doled out Rs8 billion income tax relief to the stock market.

According to Pakistan Tobacco Company - one of the two leading manufactures, as per historic practice by the FBR, the threshold between Tier I and Tier II of cigarettes moves in line with increase in Tier I FED rate. This allows for increasing the minimum price of cigarettes sold in the country complementing the public health agenda and increasing the government revenues, according to the company.

Call for research-based interventions for regulating emerging tobacco products

ISLAMABAD: Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) has called upon the government to take a research-based approach to sensibly regulate the tobacco harm reduction products in Pakistan, as any knee reaction would lead to more damage to the cause of tobacco use.

“World is exploring evidence-based interventions to address the issue of tobacco use,” said Arshad Ali Syed, head of ARI. He was commenting on a demand by tobacco control activists on legislation for regulating emerging products. He added that any legislative intervention on regulating THR products should be in the light of research in the countries such as UK, Sweden, and Japan.

With nearly 29 million tobacco users, Pakistan is considered one of the top 15 countries with a heavy burden of diseases because of combustible smoking. The total cost of all smoking attributable to diseases and deaths in Pakistan was 3.85 billion dollars in 2019.

Underlining the need to rely on independent data and research, he called for open dialogue on any new legal and administrative interventions in order to create a consensus. “We believe everyone, including parliamentarians, policymak-

ers, civil society, researchers, journalists, tobacco industry and smokers, should be consulted. Only after listening to all sides, a national consensus should be developed on regulating THR products.”

Any legal or administrative intervention without developing a national consensus would only supplement the status quo on tobacco control in Pakistan, he said. “We need laws and policies owned by all stakeholders.”

All policy interventions, he added, should be proportionate to adult smokers. “Pakistan currently has a large number of adult smokers who have been unable to quit. We support all efforts of the government of Pakistan in helping these smokers, but at the same time we would demand that THR should be part of Pakistan’s tobacco control policies and plans.” He said ARI backs THR products only for the adult smokers who are unable to give up smoking.

Syed added there can be no two opinions on keeping young people away from all types of tobacco use and THR products. However, he regretted that because of weak implementation of tobacco law, smoking in youth is a major health issue in Pakistan.

Vaping success in the UK, strong reason to follow

“Smoking in Britain is dramatically falling, largely because adults keen to quit have been able to switch to considerably less harmful vaping,” says Nancy Loucas, Executive Coordinator of CAPHRA (Coalition of Asia Pacific Tobacco Harm Reduction Advocates).

Her comments come as the UK’s Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) has released a report which it says shows a ‘vaping revolution’ has taken place over the past decade. The report is based on ASH’s annual Smokefree GB survey of more than 13,000 adults, conducted by YouGov.

“As we say in the world of Tobacco Harm Reduction (THR), consumers are the evidence. These findings out of the UK are astounding and frankly represent some strong motivation for other countries to follow suit,” says Ms Loucas.

ASH’s latest survey confirms that the main reason vapers use e-cigarettes is to quit smoking and prevent them from returning to the deadly habit. Ex-smokers also say they enjoy vaping, and it saves them money.

Subsequently, smoking is becoming less popular in the UK. In England, the number of adults smoking has fallen from 20% in 2011 to 14% in 2019. Further, the ASH survey found that vaping was responsible for an additional 70,000 ex-smokers in England alone in 2017.

“The Asia Pacific is seeing country after country legalizing and regulating vaping, because vaping bans simply don’t work.

The United Kingdom, along with the likes of New Zealand, have adopted a progressive THR approach to eliminating smoking and the data proves their success. Give adult smokers reasonable access to vaping products and they will switch, and they will survive,” she says.

CAPHRA says the latest ASH survey out of the UK also quashes the constant scaremongering internationally that vaping is an onramp to smoking, not an offramp.

Up from 800,000 a decade ago, of the 4.3 million vapers now in the UK, about 2.4 million are ex-smokers, 1.5 million current smokers, and 350,000 have never smoked a cigarette.

“Over 90% of UK vapers are ex-smokers or current smokers. Just over eight percent have never smoked. That means almost everyone vaping is doing so to stay off smoking or to reduce their smoking. Only relatively few non-smokers are vaping and as we know it’s often experimental or casual, and even fewer would ever go on to smoke. This is significant proof that vaping works,” she says.

While ASH in the UK describes the findings as great news, its chief executive is calling for greater government action to address smoking and notes the recent increase in youth vaping.

<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/GE2208/S00077/vaping-success-in-the-uk-strong-reason-to-follow.htm>

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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