

## Inside

### Page 2

Pakistan nicotine-pouch surge brings harm reduction hope in South Asia

### Page 3

Debate rages on proposed regularisation of HTPs  
Speakers for effective cessation services, utilizing THR for ending smoking

### Page 4

Sweden's snus success story, as country nears "smoke-free" status

# ARI launches knowledge hub on ending smoking



## Knowledge Hub on Ending Smoking

The knowledge hub is one-window access to all the data, research, and information on the tobacco use and efforts to control it in Pakistan and EMR. It provides a complete picture of the emerging alternative products in Pakistan and EMR. Evidence-based interventions can lead to legal, policy and administrative initiatives to end smoking. This hub collates the relevant knowledge from around the world to contribute to the aim of making our future smoke free.



ISLAMABAD: Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) has launched Pakistan's first knowledge hub on ending combustible smoking.

The knowledge hub – [www.smokefeepakistan.org](http://www.smokefeepakistan.org) – provides latest data on the use of tobacco and the tobacco harm reduction products in Pakistan and Eastern Mediterranean Region.

"This hub is the first effort to collate the knowledge regarding tobacco use and the THR products in Pakistan and EMR countries," says Arshad Ali Syed, head of the ARI. He added that the consolidation of all the relevant research and information is critical to fighting and ending combustible smoking.

Critically, the knowledge hub would provide a platform for generating new research on various aspects of tobacco use,

combustible smoking, THR products and the policymaking on ending smoking.

Additionally, it would provide ARI partners both in and outside Pakistan a platform to share research, ideas and stories etc. The hub will share findings with policymakers, the government of Pakistan, health professionals, and members of civil society.

The knowledge hub is one-window access to all the data, research, and information on the tobacco use and efforts to control it in Pakistan and EMR. It provides a complete picture of the emerging alternative products in Pakistan and EMR. Evidence-based interventions can lead to legal, policy and administrative initiatives to end smoking. This hub collates the relevant knowledge from around the world to contribute to the aim of achieving a smoke free future.

# Pakistan nicotine-pouch surge brings harm reduction hope in South Asia

By Samrat Chowdhery

Globally, almost a third of tobacco consumers use oral products. Smokeless tobacco (SLT) is generally safer than combustibles. But traditional forms popular in South Asia pack a deadly punch, leading to more than 570,000 annual deaths. Despite these products causing 88 percent of SLT-related mortality, the World Health Organization (WHO) and its allies continue to club them alongside much safer SLT options under the risk-blind “all tobacco is bad” paradigm. This funnels interventions into narrow quit strategies and forestalls harm reduction.

About 10 million people use SLT in Pakistan, comprising over 40 percent of overall tobacco use. Common products range from paan to gutka to naswar—all of which have been proven to be deadly.

In contrast, snus, a steam-pasteurized Scandinavian oral tobacco that is used by placing between the upper lip and gums, has long been known to carry far lower harms. In 2019, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized risk-reduction claims to be made about some snus products. Meanwhile a modern variant, nicotine pouches, contains no tobacco and ranks even lower on the continuum of risk. Both offer significant potential as safer substitutes to harmful SLT. Their efficacy remained to be demonstrated in a real-world South Asian setting, but that’s rapidly changing. Last week, new industry figures showed that Velo, a nicotine pouch product, had hit sales of 40 million pouches a month in Pakistan.

Such rapid substitution—Velo launched in Pakistan only in early 2020—is clear evidence that despite the cultural, social and price adhesiveness of traditional smokeless products, harm reduction here is possible.

“Product substitution has been shown to be the most effective strategy ever used to reduce the death and disease toll from toxic tobacco products,” David Sweanor, an independent tobacco industry expert and adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa, told Filter. “The evidence from wealthy countries such as Sweden, Norway, Japan, the UK and New Zealand is stunning. The role of modern oral nicotine now puts the lie to those claiming substitution is not viable in lower-income countries.”

In Sweden, adults have largely replaced cigarettes with snus over the past few decades, and the government recently announced that smoking rates in the country have declined to 5.6 percent. In 2021, the UK—which has largely promoted vapes as tobacco harm reduction (THR)—recorded its lowest ever smoking rate. Although Japan has been hostile to e-cigarettes, it has almost begrudgingly welcomed “heat-not-burn” tobacco products, and has seen close to a 43 percent drop in cigarette smoking in half a decade. Lower- and middle-income countries, which bear the brunt of the world’s tobacco-related harms, could well be next. Even some traditional SLT manufacturers in South Asia are beginning to see the value proposition of modern oral products. Among them is Nihar Dholakia, who is steering his family’s century-old SLT business in Gujarat, India, toward safer alternatives.

“India has a long history of using smokeless tobacco in the

form of dipping and chewing,” he told Filter. “Modern oral nicotine pouches, or tobacco-free snus, can play a massive role in helping ease the oral cancer burden in India. In the last two years of their presence in Pakistan, the use of toxic SLTs like gutka and naswar has dropped to a record low as exports of these goods to Pakistan from India have dipped. We may see the same in the Middle East and in parts of Africa soon.” (Eighty to 90 percent of oral cancers in India are attributed to SLT use.)

Yet the transformation that’s happening in Pakistan, like almost everywhere else, is occurring not with government support but in its absence.

“Currently, nicotine pouches are being sold and used in Pakistan in a regulatory vacuum,” Arshad Ali Syed, the head of the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI), a research group based in Islamabad, told Filter. “We believe there is a need for sensibly regulating tobacco harm reduction products, including e-cigarettes, nicotine pouches and heated tobacco products. Additionally, the regulation should be appropriate to the risk these products pose to human health.”

“The Southeast Asian region has the highest proportion of people who use harmful oral tobacco mixed with additives,” Dr. Kiran Melkote, a Delhi-based member of Association of Harm Reduction Education and Research (AHRER), told Filter. “This also tends to be concentrated among the socially and economically disadvantaged groups.”

A major roadblock to product substitution is the stance taken by the WHO and its allies, who have routinely called for bans on emerging nicotine alternatives, irrespective of their risk profiles and potential to reduce high tobacco mortality and morbidity in the region. Recently, they opposed the approval sought by Pakistan’s health ministry for heated tobacco, while their pressure on the Indian government to enact its bans is well known, and there are ongoing efforts to get them banned in Bangladesh.

“Instead of continuing counterproductive efforts to block substitution, it is time for global tobacco control groups to embrace and enhance such interventions,” Sweanor said. But so far, there appears to be less opposition to novel and risk-reduced oral products. That could be because, despite the enormity of the toxic SLT problem, the policy focus of governments and abstinence-oriented groups remains on combustibles. Further, the South Asian oral tobacco industry is unorganized and, in many cases, run with politicians’ direct or indirect participation—giving businesses protection from taxes, interventions and competition from the organized sector. Whether that situation lasts remains to be seen. “The Swedish experience has shown the way—reduced-risk oral tobacco substitutes like snus and nicotine pouches are the key to lowering the burden of death and suffering, especially in socially and economically disadvantaged groups,” Dr. Melkote said. “It is time the governments take notice and start subsidizing and substituting these products on a large scale as part of the national tobacco control programs.”

[https://filtermag.org/pakistan-oral-nicotine/?fbclid=IwAR3NgLKQGU5NuYmT5po\\_rQnhzmn1NtjRWtmG-9t1diM0Hmc4W57IhPYq2U](https://filtermag.org/pakistan-oral-nicotine/?fbclid=IwAR3NgLKQGU5NuYmT5po_rQnhzmn1NtjRWtmG-9t1diM0Hmc4W57IhPYq2U)



## Debate rages on proposed regularisation of HTPs

ISLAMABAD: After the health ministry made a bid to legalise heated tobacco products (HTPs) through a statutory regulatory order (SRO), opinions have emerged in favour and against these tobacco products which are apparently “less harmful” than conventional cigarettes.

The anti-tobacco activists have sought the intervention of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to reject the regularisation of HTPs which is part of the federal cabinet’s agenda. However, a think tank has claimed that Pakistan should move for the legalisation of HTPs because they were “less hazardous as compared to conventional cigarettes”. But these products are widely opposed by local NGOs and health activists.

The Society for Protection of the Rights of the Child (Sparc) urged all stakeholders to play their role in protecting the youth from “harmful innovative tobacco products”.

Sparc Programme Manager Khalil Ahmed Dogar said nearly 1,200 children start smoking every day in Pakistan due to easy access to tobacco products. “We can’t afford any more [children] getting addicted to these new products. It is a golden opportunity for our policymakers to give a message to our young generation that they will be protected from all harm,” he said.

Dr Ziauddin Islam, country lead for health NGO Vital Strategies, said that the researches claiming HTPs were less harmful than cigarettes were “funded by the tobacco industry”.

“The independent research has warned about their harmful effects,” he said.

Panah General Secretary Sanaullah Ghumman claimed that his organisation was “exposing [tobacco] industry’s tactics and will continue to play its role to save youth”.

Similarly, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Member National Assembly (MNA) Dr Nisar Ahmad Cheema, while speaking to participants of an event organised by Pakistan National Heart Association (Panah), said that public health was a top priority of the government and he will not compromise on the public health of people.

MNA Dr Samina Matloob said that tobacco products were very harmful to human health and suggested imposing heavy taxes on cigarettes to discourage their use. Another MNA Zahra Fatmi said that “nothing was more harmful to human health than tobacco”. She said it was the leading cause of lung cancer.

However, a think tank, the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) called upon the government to take a “research-based approach” to regulate and mitigate the harmful impacts of tobacco products. “The world is exploring evidence-based interventions to address the issue of tobacco use,” said ARI head Arshad Ali.

He said that any legislative interventions on regulating products should be in the light of independent research. Underlining the need to rely on data, he called for an open dialogue to build consensus regarding legal and administrative intervention over the use of tobacco. He stressed that the ARI backed the heated tobacco products for adult smokers who were unable to give up smoking.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1725203/debate-rages-on-proposed-regularisation-of-htps>

## Speakers for effective cessation services, utilizing THR for ending smoking



MARDAN: Pakistan needs to provide effective and affordable smoking cessation services and make tobacco harm reduction (THR) part of the national tobacco control policy to end or reduce combustible smoking prevalence in Pakistan. It was agreed at a consultation meeting on the current situation and role of the THR in ending of combustible smoking from Pakistan. The consultation was organized by Alternative Research Initiative (ARI).

The participants were informed that Pakistan is facing a heavy burden of disease because of the combustible smoking, with nearly 29 million users of tobacco in the country. Some estimates say the number of tobacco users has reached 31 million. The total economic cost of smoking in Pakistan was Rs 615.07 billion (US\$3.85 billion), in 2019, equal to 1.6 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The consultation was told that tobacco harm reduction works as almost all of the smoking-related risk arises from the smoke: the particles of tar and toxic gases that are inhaled from burning tobacco. If smokers can find satisfactory alternatives to cigarettes that do not involve combustion but do provide nicotine, then they would avoid almost all of the disease risk.

The speakers regretted that Pakistan has no national tobacco control policy and concerns of the smokers have been ignored in the tobacco control efforts. Smokers in Pakistan do not consult medical practitioners when it comes to quitting smoking. If they decide to give up smoking, they don’t know where they should seek assistance. Due to lack of the effective cessation services, less than 3% of the smokers successfully quit smoking in a year across Pakistan.

They maintained that a smoke-free Pakistan is possible to achieve before 2030. For this, government should need to ensure provision of the effective, accessible and affordable cessation services; make tobacco harm reduction part of the national tobacco control policy. They called for sensibly regulating innovative tobacco harm products in Pakistan. They also called for engaging health practitioners in cessation efforts and making smokers parts of the tobacco control efforts to achieve a smoke-free future.

## Sweden's snus success story, as country nears "smoke-free" status

BY Alex Norcia

The Swedish government has officially confirmed that smoking rates in the country have dropped to 5.6 percent, setting up the nation to become the first in Europe to reach "smoke free" status. The designation "smoke free," at least in the European Union and the United Kingdom, refers to smoking prevalence of less than 5 percent in a given population.

Sweden's success is attributable, in large part, to tobacco harm reduction (THR). But rather than the vapes that are replacing smoking in the UK, say, or the heated tobacco products that have seen cigarette sales plummet in Japan, a third major THR option is key to the Swedish story: snus, a moist oral tobacco product that's placed inside the upper lip. Smoking rates in Sweden have fallen rapidly in the last few

decades: among men from 40 percent in 1976 to 15 percent in 2002, and among women from 34 percent to 20 percent in that period. Those rates have, of course, continued to fall, as snus prevalence—especially in men—correspondingly increased, suggesting a substitution effect. Studies have shown, too, that lung cancer and heart disease have dropped, again particularly for men, and have remained at low levels when "compared with other developed countries with a long history of tobacco use," according to one peer-reviewed article in *Tobacco Control*.

Snus use is traditional in Sweden: A century ago, it heavily outweighed smoking in the country. It then declined, before making a comeback from the 1970s, overtaking smoking once again in the '90s. The government has, until quite recently, been incentivizing people to switch from cigarettes to snus through taxes.

THR proponents, who often note the World Health Organization's seeming disdain for safer nicotine products, have frequently pointed to Sweden as a model to be replicated or—at the very least—seriously studied.

"Swedish men consume as much tobacco as their male counterparts [elsewhere] in Europe, but more in the form of snus than in cigarettes—and they have done so for quite a long time," Dr. Karl Erik Lund, a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, told *Filter*. "But having worked within the tobacco control community for 36 years, my impression is that it has been difficult to accept that availability to snus may have greater impacts in reducing smoking than the [tobacco control] regulations we have spent a lifetime fighting for."

At a recent event run by the Oral Nicotine Commission in

Stockholm, Dr. Karl Fagerstrom, a Swedish psychologist and founding member of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT), shared that he hoped "the upcoming Swedish EU presidency [would be] a great opportunity to share their 5 percent success story to other EU countries." (Sweden will host the next Council of Ministers, which rotates between EU member states every six months and drives the union's legislation, starting in January 2023.) "We hope that Sweden will be generous with sharing this know-how internationally," he added.

The EU has banned the sale of snus since the early 1990s, but Sweden, which joined the bloc not long after the prohibition was enacted, has been exempt. As a whole, the EU aims to be "smoke free" by 2040. England, which has largely embraced vaping, hopes to reach that threshold by 2030.

The fact that snus remains impossible to sell in almost all of the EU has apparently driven Swedish Match—the world's leading snus producer, which also manufactures the increasingly popular Zyn nicotine pouch—toward the US market. As of 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2.3 percent of US adults reported using a smokeless tobacco product like snus "every day" or "some days." In November, Philip Morris International (PMI), with its sights also on the American marketplace, obtained more than 90 percent ownership of Swedish Match. The move was controversial. INNCO, a nonprofit that advocates for the rights of people who use safer nicotine products,

demanding in a press release that PMI's leadership "direct their vast marketing and distribution capacities to ensure that Swedish Match's snus and nicotine pouch products—which do not cause cancer, heart or lung disease—are available, affordable and acceptable to all smokers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)."

But David Sweanor, an independent tobacco industry expert and adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa, has long emphasized that Swedish Match and Volvo, "lauded for its leadership on auto risk reduction," were once controlled by the same holding company. He has used the comparison to stress that technological transformation in the nicotine industry—unlike, say, the change from gas-powered cars to electric—is still suspect and, most times, unwelcome.

"PMI is close to totally pivoting and actually changing, instead of claiming to change," Sweanor told *Filter*. "Owning Swedish Match further pivots them."

<https://filtermag.org/swedens-snus-success-smoking/?fb->



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.

To know more about us, please visit: [www.aripk.com](http://www.aripk.com) and [www.panthr.org](http://www.panthr.org)

Follow us on [www.facebook.com/ari.panthr/](https://www.facebook.com/ari.panthr/) | [https://twitter.com/ARI\\_PANTHR](https://twitter.com/ARI_PANTHR) | <https://instagram.com/ari.panthr>

Islamabad, Pakistan | Email: [info@aripk.com](mailto:info@aripk.com)