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Tobacco harm reduction and ending combustible smoking

By Junaid Ali Khan

Today the idea of ending combustible smoking is being discussed as a reality which we may see in the next one decade. Some of the countries have already deadlines for wiping out the cigarettes. As a step towards a smoke-free future, the world is talking about the concept of tobacco harm reduction or THR.

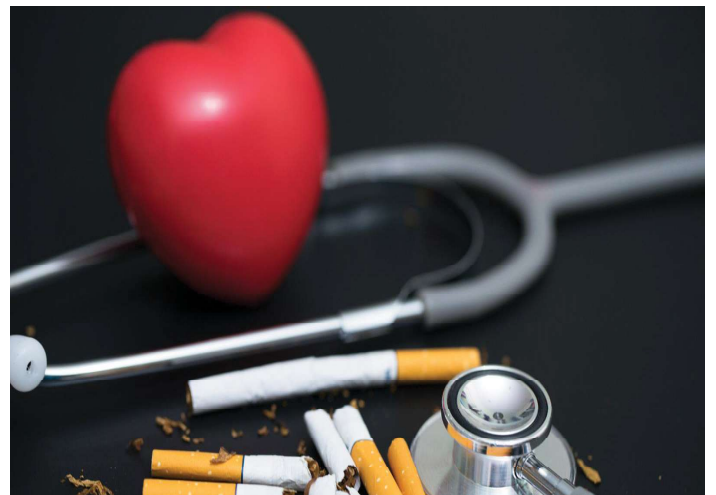
In 1970s health researchers demonstrated that the primary motivation for smoking was the use of nicotine and it was not the cause of the most severe smoking-related harms. Health researchers such as Michael Russell and Martin Jarvis in the UK and clinician Brad Rodu in the US argued for encouraging smokers to switch to less harmful forms of nicotine delivery. These less harmful nicotine delivery systems included snuff, snus and smokeless tobacco. Writing in the British Medical Journal in 1976, Michael Russell said, people "smoke for the nicotine but die from the tar".

THR works because almost all of the disease risk attributable to smoking arises from the smoke: the particles of tar and toxic gases that are inhaled from burning tobacco. Nicotine creates dependence, which keeps people smoking. The smoke contains thousands of toxic agents, many of which are formed in reactions during combustion. If smokers can find satisfactory alternatives to cigarettes that do not involve combustion but do provide nicotine, they would avoid almost all of the disease risk.

The term 'harm reduction' was coined in 1980s and referred to pragmatic interventions "that reduced health risks associated with substance use and sexual activity at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis".

However, the WHO and the tobacco control activists around the world mistrust the term "tobacco harm reduction" and claim it is another ploy of the tobacco industry.

Inhaling a burning cigarette remains the riskiest use of



nicotine, as it releases tar and gases containing thousands of toxins. These are potentially dangerous for human health, and in some cases fatal.

It is not a surprising fact that most smokers globally know that the use of tobacco is harmful to their health, but still the consumption of nicotine is through the burning of tobacco. As stated above "nicotine itself does not cause the severe illnesses associated with high-risk tobacco products like cigarettes". A comparatively low-risk drug, nicotine encourages repeated use. The repeated use of one of the reasons smokers find it hard to stop smoking, even when they know it is bad for their health.

At the start of the 21st century, the world witnessed the introduction of safer nicotine products. These stood for being non-combustible as none of them burnt tobacco and some even did not contain any tobacco at all. We today know them

as electronic cigarettes or in other words nicotine vapes, nicotine pouches, Swedish snus, US smokeless chewing tobacco and heated tobacco products. It is also important to highlight that nicotine is on the WHO's list of essential medicines with medical practitioners for decades prescribing nicotine patches and gums to people trying to quit smoking. Further, WHO recognizes and endorses the basic principle that "people should be empowered to have control over their own health in order to live healthier lives". The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) defines tobacco control as "a range of supply, demand and harm reduction strategies that aim to improve the health of a population by eliminating or reducing their consumption of tobacco products and exposure to tobacco smoke". For a country like Pakistan, with a heavy disease burden because of combustible smoking, tobacco harm reduction offers a possibility of considerably reducing the use of tobacco. The number of tobacco users has reached 29 million, with most of the users are youth. In 2019, the economic cost of smoking in Pakistan was Rs 615.07 billion (US\$3.85 billion), equal to 1.6% of the country's GDP. Smoking cessation services are conspicuous by their absence in

Pakistan, which is one of the 15 top countries with the highest burden of tobacco use morbidities and mortality. The primary tobacco law in Pakistan - the Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-smokers Health Ordinance, 2002 – does not talk about smoking cessation. As the world is looking at the role of THR in reducing cigarette consumption, Pakistan should research, review and decide how it can make THR part of its tobacco control efforts. Today THR is offering millions of smokers help to switch out of combustible smoking, especially for those who are unable to quit nicotine. The availability of safer nicotine products brings significant benefits. It is high time the governments around the globe adopt and implement tobacco harm reduction policies and products. For the use of safer nicotine products, the governments should implement effective and appropriate regulation that protects consumers and avoids youth uptake. They should also encourage switching among adult smokers and avoid policies and laws that intentionally or unintentionally favor risky products.

Rs160bn collected from tobacco makers in Pakistan last year

ISLAMABAD: The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) collected Rs160 billion tax from tobacco manufacturers last year, which includes Rs157 billion paid by two mega tobacco manufacturers.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) met here at the Parliament House to examine the FBR's Audit Report 2019-20. A brief was also distributed among members on the evasion of taxes and duties by all tobacco companies. Noor Alam Khan chaired the meeting.

There are 22 cigarette manufacturers in the country. The tobacco industry is an imperfect market, with two players taking up 70 percent of the market share, their contribution to taxes in the form of federal excise duty (FED) and sales tax (ST) is around 98 percent. Local tobacco contributed only two percent of the total FED/ST. The illicit tobacco trade is a concern for the authorities.

The FBR is cognizant of tax evasion in the tobacco sector. Though large-scale manufacturing (LSM) being the major and comparatively well-documented sector of the economy, contributes a significant portion of total federal tax revenue. However, the full real federal tax potential in the LSM segments such as tobacco is yet to be realised.

In order to control tax evasion and illicit trade of tobacco products, the FBR has introduced digital monitoring of the production and sale of all tobacco products in 2021. For this purpose, the FBR issued a license of the implementation of track and trace system (TTS) in March 2021.

Three large manufacturers including two multinationals i.e., PTC PMI, KTC have implemented automated track and trace system and six small tobacco companies are applying tax stamps manually on their products. The FBR is facing legal challenges in the implementation phase of TTS.

Local tobacco manufacturers have obtained a stay order



from the Islamabad High Court (IHC) against the implementation of the FBR's track and trace system in August 2022. In a written brief, the FBR says, according to a report, "Quantifying the Potential Tax Base of Cigarette Industry in Pakistan" released by Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) in 2019, the problems in the tobacco industry reach for beyond smuggling, and expands in the myriad of ways that the industry is underreporting production and sales. This self-assessment has led to an approximate loss of Rs40-50 billion per annum for the national exchequer. Euromonitor International in its report "Cigarettes in Pakistan - issued in January 2014 claimed: "The illicit cigarettes consist of around 39 percent of total volume sales of cigarettes in 2012". This report also stated that legal cigarette turnover was 64.5 billion cigarettes. While examining an audit para, an audit official apprised the committee that the bureau had to face a financial loss of Rs2.56 billion for not collecting value addition tax in 6,874 cases. Duty was supposed to be collected on imported and confiscated items.

https://www.brecorder.com/news/40204058?fbclid=IwAR2-bIJT8ze_VnBIP9cbNn_FLGnGYKpWuX48vWfRPP7pRqFRSXNAfwM38tGE

Can e-cigarettes help you quit smoking?

By Jen A. Miller

For adults who are looking to quit smoking cigarettes, e-cigarettes (also known as vapes, e-cigs and vape pens) have become a common option. They work by heating a liquid that usually contains nicotine into an aerosol that is then inhaled. They can still feed a nicotine addiction, but they do so without burning tobacco, which produces smoke that can damage the lungs and potentially lead to lung cancer, emphysema and other lung issues, according to the National Cancer Institute.

“Nicotine is harmful in that it perpetuates addiction to smoking,” said Jamie Hartmann-Boyce, an associate professor of evidence-based policy and practice at the University of Oxford and a member of the Cochrane Tobacco Addiction Group. But, she added, nicotine itself is not what causes the kind of lung damage that can lead to cancer and other issues.

That doesn’t mean e-cigarettes are entirely safe. Nicotine is highly addictive, and it can harm brain development in adolescents and young adults. It’s also toxic to developing fetuses, and isn’t safe for those who are pregnant, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. E-cigarette vapor can contain other potentially harmful substances, including flavorings, cancer-causing chemicals like acetaldehyde or formaldehyde, ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs, and heavy metals such as nickel, tin and lead.

Some research also suggests that e-cigarettes can be an on-ramp for cigarette smoking for young adults. In a study released in early October, federal health officials reported that 2.55 million U.S. middle and high school students said they were current users of e-cigarettes in 2022 — meaning they had reported e-cigarette use at least once in the past 30 days. That figure included about 14 percent of high school students and about 3 percent of middle school students. In one review of studies published in *JAMA Pediatrics* in 2017, researchers concluded that adolescents and young adults who used e-cigarettes were 3.6 times as likely to smoke cigarettes later in life when compared with those who did not use e-cigarettes.

In September, Juul Labs tentatively agreed to pay a \$438.5 million settlement over claims the company marketed its products to teens.

For adult cigarette smokers, though, some evidence suggests that e-cigarettes may hold promise in helping people quit. In a 2021 Cochrane review, researchers looked at 61 studies that included 16,759 adults who smoked cigarettes. They found that those who used nicotine e-cigarettes were more likely to stop smoking conventional cigarettes for at least six months than those who used other kinds of nicotine replacement therapies, like patches or gums, or nicotine-free e-cigarettes.

Aside from delivering nicotine, experts say, e-cigarettes may also be effective at helping people quit because they mimic the action and behaviors of smoking. “It would be stunning if e-cigarettes did not help people to quit smoking,” said Jonathan Foulds, a professor of public health sciences and psychiatry at the Penn State University College of Medicine who studies how smokers overcome their tobacco addictions.



Even occasional e-cigarette use can offer benefits. In a study published in 2021, Dr. Foulds and his colleagues found that smokers who replaced some of their cigarette smoking with high-nicotine e-cigarettes reduced their smoking by about half within 24 weeks, and reduced their exposures to harmful toxic associated with tobacco smoke.

While these reviews are promising, Dr. Hartmann-Boyce said that e-cigarettes were still a new and rapidly evolving technology, so it’s challenging to know what nicotine levels in e-cigarettes are best when it comes to helping people quit smoking cigarettes.

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For adults looking to reduce or stop cigarette smoking, the available evidence suggests that e-cigarettes can be a viable option, Dr. Hartmann-Boyce said. They won’t work for everyone, she said, but “we need a tool kit of things people can try.”

Dr. Foulds said that because the Food and Drug Administration regulated e-cigarettes as tobacco products instead of as smoking cessation aids, there was little research on exactly how e-cigarettes could be used by people who want to stop smoking cigarettes. Instead, he recommended that people who want to quit try consulting certain online resources, like those from Britain’s National Health Service, or forums, like the E-Cigarette Forum, where e-cigarette users share what worked for them.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/well/e-cigarettes-quit-smoking.html>

Giving up smoking

By Junaid Ali Khan

Muhammad Ismail, 24, started smoking in 2008. In 2016, his friend introduced him to e-cigarette for the first time. The switching to e-cigarette helped him quit smoking. "Vaping was the solution I was looking for to give up smoking," Ismail told Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) outside a coffee shop in Jinnah Super Market, Islamabad. Initially, he did not take vaping as a real solution to quit combustible smoking. "I remained a dual user of vaping and smoking. For a start I saw vaping as something fashionable." However, as Ismail's health problems aggravated he started looking at vaping as a solution to giving up combustible smoking. "I suffered from the shortness of breath and chorea." Ismail decided to not smoke combustible cigarettes for a month and instead vape only. "It worked and the health wise results were pleasantly positive." When asked about the money he spent on smoking and vaping, Ismail said in the long run, vaping turns out to be more cost effective. "I was spending Rs12000 a month on

combustible smoking. Yes, the price of the device is on the higher side. But it's a one-time expense." He has started to decrease the level of nicotine in his vaping. "My nicotine use has dropped to 06mg." 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. Ismail believed that most of the smokers want to quit smoking but are unable to because of the lack of effective smoking cessation services. After shifting to vaping, he thinks it can help adult smokers in quitting smoking. For this, he believes, government should devise awareness campaigns and make alternatives easily accessible for smokers who want to quit smoking but are unable to do so.

Rethinking Pakistan's tobacco control approach

In Pakistan, tobacco smoking has remained one of the most pressing issues for public health, with around 163,360 people dying in 2017 due to smoking. According to WHO, Pakistan ranks among the top 15 countries worldwide suffering from health issues from tobacco smoking. To combat the country's worsening public health, the Pakistan government, through the Ministry of Health, has been consistently working on developing and implementing tobacco control laws and programs. In 2005, Pakistan became a part of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and in 2008, developed the Tobacco Control Cell, which is responsible for tobacco control nationally. Despite all the diligent efforts, Pakistan's tobacco control policies and programs have seen only a slight reduction in the number of smokers in the country. Until now, the government of Pakistan has been focusing on tobacco cessation through increased taxes on tobacco products, improved graphic and text health warnings, and bans on advertising them in the media. However, one of the main setbacks faced by these laws and policies is their anti-smoking mantra without practically extending any health service to the users to quit tobacco consumption. This renders the cessation programs, despite undoubtedly being the ideal action, unable to achieve favorable results. Understanding the unfortunate complexities involved in outright quitting, Pakistan can take inspiration from the UK government. They have smartly adopted a harm reduction strategy to achieve their goal of saving their population from the dangers of tobacco smoking. Harm reduction refers to a

range of public health policies that prioritize reducing the negative consequences of various human behaviors, both legal and illegal when outright abstinence is unachievable. The UK government promotes shifting to vaping, heated tobacco products, and other scientifically substantiated alternatives for users who cannot quit. Similarly, the New Zealand government reversed its ban on vaping, realizing tobacco users' obstacles in quitting. The country envisions a smoke-free New Zealand by 2025, encouraging smokers- who would have continued to smoke otherwise- to shift to less harmful alternatives. Although not risk-free, alternatives such as e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, nicotine pouches, snuff, etc., do not require the burning of tobacco (which is the primary source of emission of carcinogens and other toxic materials, posing the real threat), hence exponentially reducing the risk involved with tobacco consumption. The Way Forward: In light of the constraints involved with outright tobacco smoking cessation, which make it far from an ideal situation, Pakistan's best shot would be to rather adopt a harm reduction approach, providing less harmful alternatives to legal-age smokers who are unable to quit smoking. Only with the right regulatory encouragement and support from civil society can we deliver better alternatives at scale to the hundreds of millions of adult smokers who would otherwise continue to smoke.

<https://pakobserver.net/rethinking-pakistans-tobacco-control-approach/>

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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