

No smoke. Why the fire?

The world should welcome the electronic cigarette



SOME inventions are so simple, you have to wonder why no one has come up with them before. One such is the electronic cigarette. Smoking tobacco is the most dangerous voluntary activity in the world. More than 5m people die every year of the consequences. That is one death in ten. People smoke because they value the pleasure they get from nicotine in tobacco over the long-term certainty that their health will be damaged. So it seems rational to welcome a device that separates the dangerous part of smoking (the tar, carbon monoxide and smoke released by the process of combustion) from the nicotine. And that is what an e-cigarette does. It uses electricity from a small battery to vaporise a nicotine-containing solution, so that the user can breathe it in.

E-cigarettes do not just save the lives of smokers: they bring other benefits too. Unlike cigarettes, they do not damage the health of bystanders. They do not even smell that bad, so there is no public nuisance, let alone hazard, and thus no reason to ban their use in public places. Pubs and restaurants should welcome them with open arms.

No wonder the e-cigarette market is growing. Though still small compared with that for real smokes, it doubled in America last year and is likely to do so again in 2013 (see article).

Who could object? Quite a lot of people, it seems. Instead of embracing e-cigarettes, many health lobbyists are determined to stub them out. Some claim that e-cigarettes may act as "gateways" to the real thing. Others suggest that the flavourings sometimes added to the nicotine-bearing solution make e-cigarettes especially attractive to children—a sort of nicotine equivalent of "alcopop" drinks. But these objections seem to be driven by puritanism, not by reason. Some health lobbyists are so determined to prevent people doing anything that remotely resembles smoking—a process referred to as "denormalisation"—that they refuse to endorse a product that reproduces the pleasure of smoking without the harm.

In some places politicians and other busybodies are listening. Several countries (including Austria and New Zealand) restrict the sale of e-cigarettes, for example by classifying them as medical devices; others (Brazil and Singapore) ban them altogether. Some airlines, too, ban passengers from using e-cigarettes on their planes.

We don't mind if you do

This is wrong. Those charged with improving public health should be promoting e-cigarettes, not discouraging their use. Of course, e-cigarettes should be regulated. Nicotine is an addictive drug, and should therefore be kept out of the hands of children. E-cigarettes should be sold only through licensed outlets, and to adults. It would also be a good idea to do some proper research on them. Nicotine is, after all, a poison (its real purpose is to stop insects eating tobacco plants), so there may be some residual risk to users. But nicotine poisoning is pretty low on the list of bad things that ordinary cigarettes are accused of. Some researchers reckon nicotine to be no more dangerous than caffeine, which coffee plants similarly employ as an insecticide.

The right approach is not to denormalise smoking, but to normalise e-smoking. Those who enjoy nicotine will be able to continue to use it, while everyone else will be spared both the public-health consequences of smoking and the nuisance of other people's smoke. What's not to like?

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