

New Smoking Devices... with Reduced Harm?

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More than 1,000,000,000 smokers inhale tobacco smoke every day, introducing into their bodies more than 7,000 chemical substances, out of which at least 70 are cancer-producing by themselves. The figures are alarming! and they are even more so when we ask smokers if they would like to stop smoking and 70% answer affirmatively. The problem is that only between 7% and 10% will achieve their goal. The question is why?

The very simple answer is that they are addicted to nicotine, one of the substances with the greatest addictive potential in the market, yet legally and socially accepted.

People in the world die every day from three causes fundamentally:

- Cardiovascular diseases
- Cerebrovascular diseases
- Cancer of all types

In the genesis of these three forms of dying, tobacco is immersed. Today, tobacco is the first cause of avoidable death on the planet. In Mexico tobacco is highly taxed, more than 65% of the price of a pack becomes state revenue, for many decades, this juicy income was a great business for the state, but in recent years they have realized that there are also expenses directly related with smoking. For example:

- Diagnosis and treatment of patients
- Medicines
- Rehabilitation
- Hospital stays
- Temporary and permanent disabilities
- Deaths
- Loss of productivity
- Investigation etc.

The current reality is that the “juicy” income from smoking does not cover the totality of what has to be spent to address the diseases it causes. Having said that, countries want to find a solution to this problem.

On the other hand, we have a very important actor in the scene, tobacco companies, which are aware of the harm they cause and understand the course of future trends in terms of legislation and social habits. They have realized that the global numbers on smoking prevalence are declining, therefore, they have been reinventing themselves to renew and not die. They have learned from highly successful companies that did not know how to adapt to the changes in the world and disappeared, for example Kodak!

Tobacco companies, are already selling very interesting products in other countries, such as e-cigarettes, heated tobacco, nicotine salts, etc. Recently I had the opportunity to get to know one of them in depth and without a doubt it sounds hopeful that patients who insist on smoking, might suffer less risk of damage when they continue using nicotine, through less toxic alternatives. This means that addicts to nicotine can find means to fulfill their daily cravings for this substance, through a less harmful vehicle.

In the case of the e-cigarettes, the system is rather simple. By heating a solution of nicotine, glycerin and propylene-glycol, nicotine is inhaled in the form of a vapor that enters into the lung and satisfies the need for nicotine, without smoke.

In the case of the heated tobacco, nicotine is found in tobacco leaves, similarly to what a smoker would find on a cigarette, however, the main difference is that unlike an ordinary cigarette that burns tobacco and produces smoke, heated tobacco products avoid combustion and heat the tobacco to a degree in which nicotine is released and inhaled without the solid particles present in tobacco smoke.

Tobacco companies' research, as well as other international authorities like Public Health England claim that the vapors of such devices only contains 5% of the toxic substances of a normal cigarette. Which in turn results to a less harmful environment for smokers and non-smokers.

Clearly, at this moment there are studies in favor of such products as well as against, the important thing to keep in mind is that nowadays, in countries like Mexico, where these alternative devices are not yet legal, smokers only have one choice, either they quit or they die. Beyond the speculation of detractors and the enthusiasm of those in favor of these products today, epidemiology will prove us right or wrong, but so far, science indicates that innovation on the systems to administer nicotine could potentially save lives and, therefore, efforts to understand this better, test this products more accurately and evaluate associated risk should be a must.

In recent days the FDA has given the green light to the commercialization of a heated tobacco product arguing that its introduction in the American market will benefit public health, , from the medical point of view, I think it should be a reason for hope, because although the number of smoking patients might not decrease, the level of damage should hypothetically decrease in those who stop using cigarettes and move towards other nicotine delivery systems.

The legalization and strict surveillance over the commercialization and consumption of these novel devices have several benefits from my point of view:

- Eliminates the informal market
- Obliges producers to adapt their production process with materials and supplies that must go through sanitary regulation.
- In the case of e-cigarettes, the liquids used must be manufactured with approved medical grade substances and supervised by the corresponding regulatory body.
- Offers a less dangerous alternative to adult non-cardiopathic smokers who do not want or have not been able to stop smoking.

Obviously, the message must be very clear, none of these new products are the solution to a public health issue as they are NOT innocuous, they are not exempt from risk and therefore they must marketed with severe restrictions.

- They are not for minors
- Not recommended for pregnant women
- Not recommended for smokers with known heart disease
- They are indicated exclusively for adult smokers without heart disease who do not want or have not been able to stop smoking by other methods.

It seems to me that in the coming years we will see more products of this type called Reduced Risk and that it is the obligation of those of us dedicated to the care of the sick and to the development and dissemination of knowledge, that we understand and communicate the benefits and risks of these type of technology that at least in its preliminary stage seem frankly hopeful.

To finish this opinion, I want it to be very clear that the best is #NoFumar because #FumarMata. Now if you are someone who does not plan to quit smoking or would like help to try quitting, do not hesitate to approach the specialists.

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