

PRO/CON: Are federal regulations needed for e-cigarettes?

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff 03.31.15

PRO: Treat e-cigs just like tobacco products

In 2014, the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year was "vape." The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should take a hint from the dictionary. It should write its own definition of e-cigarettes — a definition that will treat them as a tobacco product.

Congress created the FDA in 1906. It was a time of concern over the quality and purity of America's food and drug supply, which was awash in toxic dyes and preservatives. The agency was shaped by the outrageous claims of fake miracle cures known as "snake oil."

The agency was created to help people know whether a product is safe, reliable and healthy.

In short, the FDA was made to regulate products just like e-cigarettes.

Unproven Health Claims

E-cigarettes have unproven health claims. Right now, more than 16 million children can legally buy e-cigarettes and give themselves as much nicotine as they want —and nicotine is not harmless. Accidentally drinking liquid nicotine has caused a huge increase in the number of cases reported to local poison control centers — including the death of a toddler in upstate New York two months ago.

And it is a market that is booming. Last year, analysts at Wells Fargo bank estimated the overall value of the e-cigarette industry at \$2.5 billion. They predict it will grow to \$10 billion annually by 2017.

The product's growth is partly due to advertising. Yet, the other part of that growth is the growth in the number of high school students using them. The variety of e-cig flavors, including cotton candy, gummy bear and root beer float, attract young people.

E-cigarettes should be regulated, not banned. The FDA is the only agency that can do that. The FDA should prohibit sales and advertising to kids and make sure that health claims made by e-cig companies are true. It should also require companies to list the ingredients in e-cig juice.

"Juice" sounds harmless, but it's misleading. It is, in fact, a flavored nicotine mixture. The liquid nicotine is heated through a battery-powered cylinder, which can look like a cigarette, a pen or a kazoo.

Inhaling Flavored Vapors

The devices vaporize a flavored nicotine solution that users then inhale and exhale. Users inhale this flavored vapor and not burning tobacco. Because burning tobacco releases toxins like tar, this means e-cigs are safer compared to cigarettes.

But, then again, cigarettes kill 6 million people per year. In the words of historian Robert Proctor, they are the deadliest invention in human history.

And herein lies the possible merit of the e-cigarette: it could be a powerful tool for saving millions of lives if smokers switched from puffing to vaping to, ideally, nothing.

The problem is that the safety and health claims of e-cigarettes have not been proven. Online, many folks claim e-cigs have helped them kick the habit. Yet these are just anecdotes. In the words of Mitch Zeller, head

of the FDA's Tobacco Products Division, "FDA can't make regulatory policy on the basis of anecdotal evidence."

Initial evidence from a major new study should cause regulators to stop and think. The early findings from the Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health indicate high levels of "dual use" of tobacco products, meaning that smokers frequently use both e-cigarettes and regular cigarettes.

These findings agree with other studies. They have likewise found that rather than helping people quit smoking, e-cigs may actually make it harder for smokers to quit.

Warning Labels Needed

Nevertheless, e-cigarettes are frequently advertised as if they've been proven to be healthy. Researchers at the University of California-San Francisco found that 95 percent of e-cig websites either made outright claims that they had health benefits, or hinted there were some. Sixty-four percent made claims directly related to helping users quit smoking.

This is false advertising. Nicotine is addictive and it is a poison. The FDA should make both of these facts clear by requiring warning labels on e-cigarette devices and bottles of e-juices. Skin contact with even small quantities of liquid nicotine can cause dizziness, vomiting and seizures. Ingestion can be deadly.

A world in which a dangerous product is marketed and sold as a healthy one is exactly what the FDA exists to prevent.

E-cigarettes are not snake oil. But gummy bear, cotton candy and sour apple shouldn't make them go down any easier.

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CON: Vaping may help smokers kick the tobacco habit

In 1964, the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health released its very first report on tobacco smoking.

It looked at scientific evidence from more than 7,000 articles related to smoking and disease. Based on those studies, the report cited tobacco smoking as a major cause of lung and throat cancer and chronic bronchitis.

The report launched a "war on smoking." It soon required health warnings on cigarette packages and bans on cigarette commercials on radio and television. In recent years, it has led to bans on smoking in certain areas, like restaurants and other public places.

Over this half-century of cigarette regulation, two facts have been public knowledge: 1) smoking tobacco kills people; 2) once a person is addicted to smoking cigarettes, or to the nicotine one ingests by smoking cigarettes, it is very hard for a person to quit.

Switching From Smoking

Then an invention came along — e-cigarettes. They have nicotine just like a tobacco cigarette, but without any apparent link to cancer or lung disease. Many people cheered the new invention.

Finally there was a product that could help those who were addicted and for whom the available anti-smoking aids had not been of sufficient help.

Lives could be saved. People could replace their tobacco cigarettes with e-cigarettes and switch out smoke and carcinogens with water vapor. And that horrible smell would be replaced with no smell at all — or the light scent of a flavor like mint or strawberry.

One would expect the response of the public health community to be a near-universal “hurrah.” In some parts of the community, people have been happy.

Addicted To Regulation?

But some people appear to be addicted to regulation, and not to public health. For them, e-cigarettes provide an unwelcome challenge.

How can they want to ban the use of a product that saves lives?

For many of these regulators, they are worried about “what ifs.” “What if” vaping turns out to be harmful? “What if” people who vape decide to start smoking?

These “what ifs” are quite unlikely. However, it is on the basis of them that some people support bans. Some want bans on the sale of e-cigarettes, or grossly high taxes on e-cigarettes to discourage the use of e-cigs. Some even want outright bans on the use of e-cigarettes in public.

But such policies mean nicotine addicts will be less likely to use e-cigarettes. Instead, they may be more likely to keep smoking tobacco. The obvious and predictable result is relatively more tobacco smoking and thus, more illness and death.

Don't Treat E-Cigs Like Cigarettes

The director of the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Tobacco Products, Mitch Zeller, made the key point clear: “People are smoking for the nicotine, but dying from the tar.”

He says e-cigarette regulation should take into account that different nicotine products “pose different levels of risk to the individual,” and regulate accordingly.

Which means America should not treat e-cigarettes and vaping just like tobacco smoking and smoking. Smoking is clearly far more dangerous than vaping.

In fact, vaping can cause people to voluntarily stop smoking. Because of that, a carefully crafted regulatory policy that steers Americans from smoking toward vaping as a replacement provides “an extraordinary public health opportunity.”

Zeller makes a lot of sense. By contrast, there are the regulation fanatics. These people are the enemy of public health.

Smoking kills. Vaping is a safer alternative, and our nation’s regulatory policy will save lives if it reflects this fact.

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Article Reflection Questions

- _____ Which statement would both the PRO and CON authors likely agree with?
 - E-cigarettes are an effective support for people quitting smoking
 - E-cigarettes pose a danger to the public, especially children.
 - E-cigarettes should be regulated by the U.S. government.
 - E-cigarettes may pose long-term health risks similar to regular cigarettes.
- _____ Which statement would only the CON author agree with?
 - E-cigarettes do not seem to be effective at helping people to quit smoking cigarettes.
 - E-cigarettes should be regulated, even if they are not regulated like regular cigarettes.
 - Even though e-cigarettes are dangerous, they are much less dangerous than regular cigarettes.
 - E-cigarettes likely do not have long-term health consequences.
- _____ Each answer option below is a question addressed by both authors. Which question is thoroughly examined by the PRO author but brushed aside by the CON author?
 - How does vaping fit into the history of health regulations in the United States?
 - What are the dangers posed by e-cigarettes?
 - What are the possible benefits of e-cigarettes?
 - How should the U.S. government regulate e-cigarettes?
- _____ Which claim by the CON author is MOST important in supporting the writer's point of view?
 - And that horrible smell would be replaced with no smell at all — or the light scent of a flavor like mint or strawberry.
 - It looked at scientific evidence from more than 7,000 articles related to smoking and disease.
 - Once a person is addicted to smoking cigarettes, or to the nicotine one ingests by smoking cigarettes, it is very hard for a person to quit.
 - Some want bans on the sale of e-cigarettes, or grossly high taxes on e-cigarettes to discourage the use of e-cigs.
- Which side, pro or con, do YOU support and **WHY? Be sure to use text evidence in your answer!**
- How does this article relate to the book *The Outsiders*. Be specific!