

Letter from sixty-two specialists in nicotine science, policy and practice

*Indian Council of Medical Research
Prof. Balram Bhargava
Secretary, DHR & Director General ICMR*

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White Paper on Electronic Nicotine Delivery System by the Indian Council of Medical Research: A Critical Appraisal of the Scientific Evidence

Dear Prof. Bhargava,

On 31 May 2019, an ad-hoc Expert Committee of the ICMR published its first report on e-cigarettes, "White Paper on Electronic Nicotine Delivery System". Their conclusion recommends a "...complete prohibition on ENDS or e-cigarettes in India in the greater interest of protecting public health". We are concerned that the ICMR has issued this radical policy recommendation in light of the broad consensus in the scientific community that e-cigarettes are much less harmful than combustible cigarettes including bidis. The major arguments in support of the Committee's conclusions are: 1) adverse health effects and unknown health risks, 2) risks from second-hand exposure, 3) risk of dual use and initiation of tobacco addiction among non-smokers and e-cigarette use by youth, and 4) lack of effectiveness for smoking reduction and cessation. The scientific arguments advanced by the ICMR Expert Committee requires critical appraisal.

The evidence that e-cigarettes are far less harmful than combustible cigarettes and overall carry a much smaller health risk is clear. Also, clinical evidence is mounting that switching from smoking to e-cigarette use could improve disease conditions. The ICMR White Paper fails to consider the substantial body of literature that demonstrates the harm reduction potential of e-cigarettes and its position is not in line with the recommendations of many authoritative health organizations worldwide. From a health perspective, e-cigarettes represent an important tool for smokers to reduce their risk.

The ICMR claims in their report that second-hand exposure to e-cigarettes has adverse health effects. There is no published scientific evidence of harm to bystanders from exposure to an e-cigarette. The available evidence on e-cigarette aerosol chemistry indicates that any risk of harm, if present, is extremely low, and orders of magnitude lower compared with tobacco smoke. Besides, because the lack of side-stream emissions, e-cigarettes aerosol emissions contributes only minimally to environmental exposure and very unlikely to cause any substantial health concern.

ICMR questions the value of e-cigarettes for smoking reduction and cessation. Negative association is normally found in studies with a high probability of selection bias. Identifying these biases in earlier studies is important to consider when assessing evidence for e-cigarettes and smoking cessation. Notably, results from studies with long-term and daily e-cigarette use consistently report positive associations between e-cigarette use and smoking cessation. The evidence from the newer, better-designed studies support that e-cigarettes have a strong potential for smoking cessation and relapse prevention, particularly for those smokers who fail at cessation or are unwilling to attempt to quit with currently approved

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medications.

Public health is rightly concerned with any potential increase in nicotine use by youth, but concern of increased usage by youth has been driven by misclassification bias in many reports. One-time or experimental use of an e-cigarette is extremely unlikely to increase any risk for developing any disease, particularly given the very low risk profile of e-cigarettes. For public health surveillance, it is critical to survey the prevalence of regular (weekly and daily) e-cigarettes use, e-cigarette use by youth who smoke, and e-cigarette use by never-smoking youth. Another important indicator is changes in smoking prevalence since the introduction during the period of e-cigarettes. The White Paper argues that e-cigarettes are a “gateway” to tobacco cigarette use. The strongest argument against the “gateway” theory is the marked and accelerated decline (by more than 50%) in smoking prevalence among US youth observed since 2011, the period when e-cigarettes became popular. There is no doubt that any use of e-cigarettes by youth is not desirable. However, from a public health standpoint, the relative harm of e-cigarettes must be kept in context because risks related to e-cigarette use are much lower than the risks from smoking. Also, availability of e-cigarettes might act as a “distraction” and deter many youths away from combustible cigarettes.

Because the White Paper is based on uncritical reporting of the evidence it fails to report a balanced overview of the risk-benefit ratio of these new technologies, and grossly misrepresents the actual evidence base. The Committee’s proposal of banning e-cigarette in India is therefore not justified. A detailed critical appraisal of the White Paper along with suggestions for improving individual as well as public health will be published soon in the Indian Journal of Clinical Practice and is enclosed with this letter for your reference.

We believe the time has come to do something more for smokers who want to quit, and India and its agencies could be a world leader in crafting a new path of e-cigarettes and harm reduction and cessation. New Delhi has the opportunity to improve public health by integrating existing tobacco control policies with the promotion of less harmful forms of nicotine consumption for cigarette substitution. This opportunity will be lost if India bans e-cigarettes, and no new strategies means the tobacco epidemic will continue.

India is the world largest democracy and now its fifth largest economy. The Indian leadership in public health is a natural corollary of its growing international presence. We look forward to a constructive exchange. We urge to ICMR to reconsider its recommendation on a ban, and we hope that this discussion will enable them to understand the science and evidence on e-cigarettes and tobacco control.

Yours sincerely,

David B Abrams PhD.

Professor, Dept of Social and Behavioral Sciences
NYU College of Global Public Health, New York
University.
New York, USA

Dr. K K Aggarwal

Physician and Interventional Cardiologist
President of the Heart Care Foundation of India
Past National President of Indian Medical
Association
President (Elect) Confederation of Medical
Associations of Asia and Oceania
Recipient of Padma Shri award
New Delhi, India

Prof. Atul Ambekar, M.D.

Chairperson, Addictive Disorder Specialty Section,
Indian Psychiatric Society
New Delhi, INDIA

Frank Baeyens PhD

Professor of Experimental Psychology
Centre for Psychology of Learning and
Experimental Psychopathology
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Leuven, Belgium

Scott D. Ballin, JD

Health Policy Consultant
Former Vice President and Legislative
Counsel American Heart Association

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Anastasia Barbouni MD, MSc, PhD

Professor of Public Health
Department of Public Health Policy, School of
Public Health,
University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece

Clive D. Bates, MA, MSc

Director, Counterfactual Consulting
Former Director, Action on Smoking and Health
UK
United Kingdom

Prof. Robert Beaglehole

Emeritus Professor of Community Health
University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand.

Prof Fabio Beatrice

Director
ENT Department - No Smoking Center
S. G. Bosco Hospital
Torino, Italy

Ruth Bonita PhD MD (hc)

Emeritus Professor,
University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand

Ron Borland PhD FASSA

Professor of Psychology – Health Behaviour
School of Psychological Sciences
The University of Melbourne,
Victoria, Australia

Prof. Aldo Eugenio Calogero

Full Professor of Endocrinology
Department of Clinical and Experimental
Medicine
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Dr Pasquale Caponnetto

Contract Professor in Clinical and General
Psychology
Research Coordinator, Smoking Cessation and
Research Center, Catania University Hospital
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Dr. Massimo Caruso (MSc, PhD)

Adjunct Professor of Pathology and
Immunopathology
Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Dr. Carlo Cipolla

Director
Cardiology Division, Istituto Europeo di Oncologia
(IEO)
Milano, Italy

Prof. Jean-François Etter

Institute of Global Health, Faculty of Medicine
University of Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland

Prof. Karl Fagerstrom Ph.D.

President Fagerstrom Consulting
Vaxholm, Sweden

Konstantinos Farsalinos, MD, MPH

Researcher
Onassis Cardiac Surgery Center, Athens, Greece
University of Patras, Greece
National School of Public Health, Athens, Greece

Prof. Pio Maria Furneri

Associate Professor of Microbiology and Clinical
Microbiology
Department of Biomedical and Biotechnological Sciences
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Dr Marewa Glover

Director, Centre of Research Excellence:
Indigenous Sovereignty & Smoking
Tobacco Section Editor, Harm Reduction Journal
Auckland, New Zealand

Thomas J. Glynn, PhD

Adjunct Lecturer
Prevention Research Center, School of Medicine
Stanford University
Palo Alto, USA

**Dr Bharat Gopal MD, DNB, MNAMS, FIAMS,
FNCCP, FIAB, FCCP (USA)**

Sr Consultant in Pulmonology, Sleep Medicine &
Critical Care
Director, NATIONAL CHEST CENTRE
New Delhi, INDIA

Professor Wayne Hall

Centre for Youth Substance Abuse Research
The University of Queensland
Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital Site
Herston, Australia

Prof. Emmanuele A. Jannini

Chair of Endocrinology and Medical Sexology
University of Rome Tor Vergata
Rome, Italy

Professor Martin Jarvis

Emeritus Professor of Health Psychology
University College London
London, UK

Dr. Aparajeet Kar

Consultant Pulmonologist and Intensivist,
BLK Centre of Critical Care,
New Delhi, India

Letter from sixty-two specialists in nicotine science, policy and practice

Lynn T. Kozlowski, PhD

Professor of Community Health and Health Behavior
School of Public Health & Health Professions
University at Buffalo, SUNY
Buffalo, USA

George Lagoumintzis, PhD

Senior Research Fellow
Department of Pharmacy, Laboratory of Molecular Biology and Immunology
University of Patras
Patras, Greece

Christopher E. Lalonde, PhD

Professor of Psychology
University of Victoria
Victoria, Canada

Jacques Le Houezec, PhD

Honorary Clinical Associate Professor, School of Medicine, University of Nottingham
Nottingham, UK.
Independent consultant in Public Health - Smoking Cessation Specialist
Rennes, France.

Prof. Giovanni Li Volti, MD, PHD

Full Professor of Biochemistry
Department of Biomedical and Biotechnological Sciences
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Karl E Lund, Ph.d

Senior Researcher
Norwegian Institute of Public Health
Oslo, Norway

Dr. Vikas Malhotra MS, DNB, FRCS(Glasg), MBA

Professor of ENT & HNS
Maulana Azad Medical College, Lok Nayak Hospital
New Delhi, Delhi, India

Bernhard-Michael Mayer, PhD

Professor & Chair
Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology
University of Graz
Graz, AUSTRIA

Kevin McGirr, MS,MPH, RN

Clinical Professor
School of Nursing, Department of Community Health Systems
University of California
San Francisco, USA

Neil McKeganey Ph.D FRSA

Director
Centre for Substance Use Research
Kelvin Campus, West of Scotland Science Park,
Glasgow, Scotland

Conjoint Associate Professor Colin Mendelsohn

School of Public Health and Community Medicine
University of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia

Dr. Fares Mili

Addictologist and Pulmonologist
Chairman Tunisian Society of Tobacology and Addictive Behaviours (STTACA)
Tunis, Tunisia

Raymond Niaura, PhD

Professor, Departments of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Epidemiology
NYU College of Global Public Health, New York University
New York, USA

Prof David Nutt DM FRCP FRCPsych FMedSci DLaws

Edmond J. Safra Prof of
Neuropsychopharmacology
Imperial College London
Hammersmith Hospital, London, UK

Dr. John Oyston, BMedSci MB BS, FRCA, FRCP

Assistant Professor of Anesthesia
Department of Anesthesia
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Prof. Tikki Pang (Pangestu),

Visiting Professor,
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy,
National University of Singapore,
SINGAPORE

Prof. Young-bum Park

Faculty of Economics
Hansung University
Seoul, South Korea

Prof. Riccardo Polosa

Full Professor of Internal Medicine
Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine (MEDCLIN), University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Konstantinos Poulas, PhD

Associate Professor of Biochemistry
Department of Pharmacy, University of Patras
Patras Science Park
PATRAS, GREECE

Dr. R.Pradeep,MD

Assistant Professor,
Department of Psychiatry,
Tagore Medical College Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

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Dr. Vikas Punamiya MD MRCP (UK) FCCP (USA)

Consultant Interventional Pulmonology & Sleep Physician
Director, Advanced Respiratory Interventions & Sleep Evaluation (ARISE) Medical Research Centre
Mumbai, India

Lars M. Ramström PhD

Principal Investigator
Institute for Tobacco Studies
Täby, Sweden

Dr. Louise Ross

Clinical consultant,
National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training, UK

Sally Satel MD

Lecturer, Yale University School Of Medicine
American Enterprise Institute
WASHINGTON DC, USA

Prof. Dr Rohan Savio Sequeira MD FAGE FACP FACLM FAAD MPCDS PHD

Director - Department of Cardio Metabolic Medicine
Jaslok Hospital & Research Centre
Mumbai – India

Dr Lion Shahab

President-Elect Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco Europe
Associate Professor in Health Psychology
University College London
London, UK

Michael Siegel, MD, MPH

Professor
Department of Community Health Sciences
Boston University School of Public Health
Boston, USA

G. Karl Snaebjörnsson MD

Specialist in Family Medicine
Kópavogur, Iceland

Professor Andrzej Sobczak PhD

Head of the General and Analytical Chemistry Department
School of Pharmacy with the Division of Laboratory Medicine
Medical University of Silesia
Katowice, Poland

Gerry Stimson

Emeritus Professor of Sociology
Imperial College London
London, UK

Dr. Sree T.Sucharitha, MD

Associate Professor,
Department of Community Medicine, Tagore Medical College Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr Roberto A Sussman

Institute of Nuclear Sciences
National Autonomous University of Mexico UNAM
Mexico City, Mexico

David T. Swenor J.D.

Chair of the Advisory Board, Centre for Health Law, Policy & Ethics, University of Ottawa
Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Canada

Prof Umberto Tirelli

Head Scientist
National Cancer Institute
Aviano (PN) Italy

Prof. Venera Tomaselli

Associate Professor of Social Statistics
Department of Political and Social Sciences,
University of Catania
Catania, Italy

Dr. Alex Wodak AM,

Emeritus Consultant
Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital
Darlinghurst, Australia