

REALITY CHECK: REDUCED HARM PRODUCTS ARE A VITAL PART OF MAKING CANADA SMOKE-FREE

Today is World No Tobacco Day. A day dedicated to encouraging people around the world to stop smoking. Since 1987, the goal has been to reduce the incidence of smoking. In Canada, smoking rates are at historic lows.

Over the last 35 years, since the inception of World No Tobacco Day, more progressive approaches to tobacco cessation have emerged. We know that it is not a binary equation. Smokers no longer have only two options presented to them as in the past: quit or die. The last decade has seen innovations that make it more possible than ever to quit, to reduce the harm associated with smoking, and to provide a less risky alternative to adult consumers.

Vapour products and other reduced risk nicotine products must be part of the discussion.

Over the last few months, I have had the opportunity to travel across the country to meet with a wide range of individuals to discuss our journey to reduce the health impact of our business and build A Better Tomorrow for all of our stakeholders. The bad news is that the misinformation out there about vaping products is real and is hindering the ability for these products to achieve their full public health potential. The good news is that most people are open to the conversation, to listen and learn, and some even a little surprised of the progress we've made on our tobacco harm reduction agenda.

Let me be clear: we do not disagree on the basics. Smoking causes real and serious health risks. Yet despite these risks, many adults choose to smoke. As such, developing less risky alternatives to smoking, such as vaping products, has been a priority for us, and our parent company, BAT, has invested billions of dollars in the development of less risky options.

The reality is that we need more than a good product that smokers are willing to use. We need progressive government strategies and regulations to facilitate the awareness, accessibility, and acceptability of these products.

Unfortunately, in the past few years, we have some provincial governments impose extreme regulations on vapour products, such as bans on flavours, which has sent vapers back to cigarette. This is not good.

Meanwhile, other countries recognize the value of harm reduced nicotine products and have made the shift. Public Health England continues to promote the fact that vaping is at least 95% less harmful than cigarettes. Around the world, health organizations are working to ensure vaping products remain accessible and affordable to adult smokers to encourage them to switch - such as the U.K. College of Physicians, Public Health England, France's Académie nationale de médecine and New Zealand's Ministry of Health. Even groups like Cancer Research U.K. encourage smokers to switch to vaping.

However, in Canada, we continue to make decisions that are a disservice to public health. Decisions on tobacco and vapour products must be based on science and support access to smoking alternatives.

In the absence of leadership on this front, we will continue to do everything we can to amplify the facts and science with the hopes our message will get through and more Canadian smokers transition to smoking alternatives. Our Clear the Smoke initiative is an attempt to provide Canadians with factual and scientifically accurate information on vaping.

Believe it or not, we have the same goal: to reduce the harm caused by smoking. If the federal and provincial governments put a serious focus on tobacco harm reduction, I am convinced it will achieve its goal of reducing smoking prevalence to less than 5% by 2035 ahead of schedule.

Ralf Wittenberg
President & CEO
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