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Letter to the Editor

Reducing nicotine content of cigarettes: In search of a regulator

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Donny and his colleagues pledged for a "novel approach to tobacco control", addressing the addictiveness of tobacco by reducing the nicotine content of cigarettes (Donny et al., 2014). This deserves some comments.

First, regarding novelty, reducing harm is a marketing spin which has been used for long by the tobacco industry. In this context, many field experiments have been performed, from filter to low tar and light cigarettes. The effect has never been harm reduction but a continuous rise in new consumers, specifically the most vulnerable and the youngest (Blackford et al., 2006; Etter et al., 2003; Harris et al., 2004). Harm reduction is an old concept which has enduringly failed to show evidence (Stead and Lancaster, 2007).

Second, Donny and his colleagues' approach may be smart for an endgame strategy but its limitations cannot be ignored. Although smart as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is legally barred from banning cigarettes, it can reduce nicotine to any level above zero: the 2009 Tobacco Control Act giving it the authority to regulate tobacco production. The ban on sweet and fruit flavors was a smoke screen, their market share being less than 0.1%. Indeed, the FDA's Advisory Committee failed to recommend a ban on menthol cigarettes despite the evidence of their devastating effects. This is a major setback for public health as 80% of African–American smokers primarily consume menthol cigarettes (Siegel, 2011). Previously, the US Supreme Court had ruled on 15 December 2008 that smokers could sue tobacco companies under state laws against deceptive advertising that suggested that "Light" and "Low-Tar" cigarettes were safer than ordinary ones, while FDA's ban on these deceptive labels took effect one year and a half later, in June 22, 2010. Faced with the tobacco industry, the FDA repeatedly loses its way (Gottlieb, 2014). Last, politicians even weaken FDA's forceless proposals (Clarke and Begley, 2014).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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