Written evidence submitted by Professor Mark Conner (ECG0024)

Mark Conner is Professor of Applied Social Psychology at the University of Leeds and is an expert on the determinants and means to change health behaviours.

Response to question
The uptake of e-cigarettes among young people and evidence on whether e-cigarettes play a role in ‘re-normalising’ smoking.

1. Cross-sectional studies in the UK show that while rates of e-cigarettes use in adolescents is increasing, rates of cigarette smoking is decreasing. This would appear to suggest that e-cigarette use is not associated with impacts on subsequent cigarette use. However, a growing number of longitudinal studies show that adolescent use of e-cigarettes is associated with an increased risk of going on to start cigarette smoking. These studies include a number of US studies (e.g., Leventhal et al., 2015; Primack et al., 2015; Barrington-Trimis et al., 2016; Wills et al., 2016) and two UK studies (Conner et al., 2017; Best et al., 2017). There are also a more limited set of studies showing e-cigarette use is associated with subsequent escalation of cigarette use (e.g., Conner et al., 2017).

2. This work has a number of limitations including a focus on low levels of both e-cigarette and cigarette use. Some have suggested that these findings may be attributable to those adolescents who were likely to go on to smoke being more likely to experiment with e-cigarettes. Inconsistent with this view several studies have shown that it is groups who would normally be expected to be less likely to initiate smoking whose likelihood of initiating cigarette smoking is most increased by trying e-cigarettes. For example, Barrington-Trimis et al. (2016) reported that the risk of smoking initiation based on prior use of e-cigarettes was larger for those who strong versus weak intentions not to smoke. While two UK studies (Conner et al., 2017; Best et al., 2017) reported that the risk of smoking initiation based on prior use of e-cigarettes was larger for those with fewer smoking friends. These findings do not appear to be consistent with the idea that the impact of e-cigarettes on subsequent smoking is merely a reflection of the fact that this group is more interested in all forms of nicotine use and the fact that e-cigarette use came first is purely coincidental.

3. Our understanding of the role of e-cigarettes on the normalisation of smoking and the transition to cigarette smoking in adolescents is limited and requires further study. Nevertheless we need to be cautious in assuming that e-cigarette use has no consequences for subsequent smoking in adolescents.

December 2017
References


