The benefits and risks of e-cigarettes as a ‘stop smoking’ tool

1. Executive summary

- Written evidence summarising research findings from the ‘E Cigarette Trajectories’ project (funded 11/2016-02/2018)
- Mixed methods study including interviews, observations and online data collection
- E-cigarettes offer a unique substitute option to replace tobacco smoking
- Consumer choice and individualised preferences in e-cigarettes are important to maintain abstinence from tobacco smoking
- The social and cultural aspects of vaping, supported by a consumer led market, are important aspects of e-cigarette use from a user perspective
- Brief lapses to tobacco smoking may not result in relapse if ongoing vaping is supported as a substitute option

2. Background:

E-cigarettes are now the most popular method of choice for smoking cessation in the UK. However, we know that although many smokers manage to quit, in the general population the majority of quit attempts result in eventual relapse back to smoking. Most vapers state that they use e-cigarettes for smoking cessation or to cut down from smoking. Many have periods of dual use with tobacco smoking before eventually quitting smoking. Our research has collected mixed methods data from a sample of people who have quit smoking using an e-cigarette, to understand how e-cigarettes may contribute not just to smoking cessation, but to preventing relapse back to tobacco smoking (i.e. sustained abstinence).

3. Methods:

Combined qualitative analysis using thematic coding with ethnographic observation and discourse analysis techniques. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 40 participants, complemented by innovative photo elicitation methodology to specifically examine the social contexts and meaning of e-cigarette use in the daily lives of consumers. Data were iteratively analysed to situate experiences of smoking lapse within trajectories of e-cigarette use, seeking to understand how use of e-cigarettes over time interacted with continued smoking abstinence, or relapse. An online sample of 220 in depth views has also been collected ready for analysis.

4. Results:

Variable aspects of e-cigarettes offer the ex-smoker a unique substitute experience beyond other methods of smoking cessation. Ex-smokers can choose a substitute ‘smoking-like’ experience, preferable for some, or a move away from smoking towards a new vaping identity, attractive to others. Consumer choice is important – many users told us that they did not want to be medicalised, and some never actually intended to quit tobacco smoking, but having tried vaping, came to prefer it, and then to eventually quit smoking.
Written evidence submitted by Dr Caitlin Notley (ECG0028)

Having choice in device type, flavourings in e liquids, different nicotine strengths, and having the ability to customise devices was very positive from a user perspective.

Users told us that having the option of vaping suggests that maintenance of abstinence from tobacco may be easier than with other methods of smoking cessation. Importantly, our sample of vapers demonstrate how smoking lapse may be perceived qualitatively differently than for other ex-smokers, as a ‘permissive lapse’. Having the alternative of vaping means that full relapse to smoking is not perceived as inevitable following a lapse, as it may have been previously. (Research evidence prior to the widespread use of e cigarettes demonstrated a strong association between just a single smoking lapse and relapse).

The inherently social and consumer led phenomenon of vaping is important to users, and vape shops / peer networks have important roles to play in supporting sustained vaping in order to prevent return to tobacco smoking. Our observations in vape shops suggested that, rather than smoking cessation medical advice, attempts were made by shop staff to understand customers’ smoking preferences in order that advice could be tailored to the most appropriate device and e-liquid strength/flavour. Vape shops offered an ongoing point of contact and advice for continuing to vape, experimenting with products to suit individual needs, troubleshooting problems, offering practical help and maintenance, and providing important safety advice.

5. Conclusions:

Our research, which we have initially presented at academic conferences and are due to publish imminently, demonstrates how the role of smoking lapse is theoretically redefined, drawing on novel data from ex-smokers in the context of vaping. Vaping offers a viable substitution option for smoking and an alternative to relapse. Vape shops offer well-intentioned support from an ‘informed expert-by-experience’ perspective. The culture and social environment of the shops offered an identity related aspect to vaping that may support long-term smoking abstinence. Evidence from our research therefore suggests that, to support sustained abstinence from tobacco smoking, the social aspects, culture and legislation allowing vaping to continue as a consumer driven phenomenon should be supported. Restrictive public health policies that treat vaping the same as smoking could be damaging in confusing consumers about vaping, which should be positioned as a tobacco harm reduction strategy.

December 2017

3Society for the Study of Addiction Annual Symposium. Redefining understanding of tobacco smoking lapse in the context of vaping (November 2017)
4Global Forum on Nicotine (Warsaw) The unique contribution of e-cigarettes for avoiding relapse to smoking – consumer experiences of quitting, switching, dual using, and ‘permissive lapse’ on the path to maintaining abstinence (June 2017)
5Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (Florence) E cigarettes for smoking relapse prevention – qualitative findings from a UK study (March 2017)
6UK Electronic Cigarette Research Forum. ECtra study (e cigarette trajectories) real world experiences of using e-cigarettes for avoiding relapse to smoking: success or failure. A qualitative study. (January 2017)
7E Cigarette Symposium, France. The potential of E Cigarettes for smoking relapse prevention - early findings from a UK real world study (December 2016)
8Society for the Study of Addiction Annual Symposium. Real world experiences of using e-cigarettes for avoiding relapse to smoking – emergent findings from an ongoing qualitative study (November 2016)
9Global Addictions Conference (Venice) Real world experiences of using e-cigarettes for avoiding relapse to smoking – emergent findings from an ongoing qualitative study (October 2016)
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Society for the Study of Addiction Annual Symposium A qualitative study of support provided by vape shops to people wanting to use e-cigarettes to quit smoking (November 2017)