

## **eCigarettes are part of the solution to one of Europe's most serious health problems: tobacco smoking**

Written by Giovanni La Via on 23 April 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

eCigarettes are redefining how we should think about public health policy, writes Giovanni La Via.



**Giovanni La Via** | *Photo credit: Natalie Hill*

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eCigarettes are one of the most important innovations in the last decade in the fight against tobacco. Use has risen exponentially since their introduction, with smokers choosing to switch to less harmful products, including eCigarettes, as an alternative to smoking, with many succeeding in quitting completely.

Several leading health organisations, such as the Royal College of Physicians, Public Health England and the US National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, have already recognised eCigarettes as being far less harmful than traditional cigarettes and effective tools in quitting

smoking. It is likely that we are finally looking at a solution to one of the most intractable problems facing European public health: tobacco smoking.

According to recent studies, tobacco is Europe's largest preventable cause of death; tobacco-related diseases pose a significant burden on public health systems.

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Ignoring the science that tells us that eCigarettes are less harmful than conventional cigarettes is a mistake. Incorporating eCigarettes as part of the solution to stopping smoking is a step that Europe needs to take.

Looking at the encouraging scientific evidence, EU regulation must acknowledge that eCigarettes provide us with an unmissable public health opportunity. Taking a conservative approach to public health policy, which ignores the rising consensus within the public health community, has not solved the issue of smoking and related diseases. Let's trust the science.

It is time for the European Commission to take a proactive approach to the public health burden of smoking and adopt an open-minded position on eCigarettes. By integrating the innovation principle into public health policy, we have the opportunity to make significant progress in the fight against smoking.

A few weeks ago, I called on my colleagues in the European Parliament to support and allow for the development of a comprehensive and science-based regulatory framework for eCigarettes. With almost six million Europeans now using eCigarettes, we must do our utmost to support movements that can alleviate this public health burden.

We need to ensure that regulating eCigarettes cannot come at the expense of innovation, a pivotal component to finding new ways to resolving serious public health issues in Europe. Vaccines, birth control and radiology imaging have all been game changers for European public health.

eCigarettes could very well be the silver bullet in our fight against tobacco consumption. eCigarettes and traditional cigarettes are not the same and shouldn't be treated as such.

One of the greatest challenges for eCigarettes is dispelling the myths surrounding them. By working with public health authorities across the EU, policymakers need to address some of the most common misconceptions surrounding eCigarettes and vaping.

These misconceptions on the risks of eCigarettes can have real-world consequences for public health. If smokers believe, incorrectly, that there is no point in switching to vaping because both are equally dangerous, then that person may not take the opportunity to quit smoking for good and live a longer, healthier life.

At the event I hosted in Parliament, many academics asserted with certainty that that eCigarettes do not cause respiratory diseases, that they are regulated and safe products, that they are not a gateway to smoking and that the nicotine they contain is not harmful. Despite all the scientific findings, four out of ten smokers still wrongly think nicotine causes cancer.

European health policy needs to follow the example of some of the progressive policies that have been implemented at national level. The UK government published a tobacco control action plan that encouraged the uptake of eCigarettes.

We need, at European level, to ensure a regulatory framework that will encourage smokers to stop using conventional cigarettes and not rely on restriction and prohibition. The future of European health policy lies in educating smokers on safe alternatives and making eCigarettes available as effective tools for quitting smoking.

One of the UK's leading charities, Cancer Research UK, has recognised this potential and launched a campaign to inform smokers as to why eCigarettes are safer and encourage them to try vaping if they are seeking to quit.

It is time for the EU to take the lead on this issue and set out a comprehensive health strategy based on the latest scientific evidence on eCigarettes in order to take full advantage of the opportunity they present in helping people quit smoking, thereby improving their quality of life and saving millions of lives.

## About the author

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