Background

“I believe that tobacco harm reduction has the potential to be one of the biggest public health opportunities of this generation”

(David O'Reilly, British American Tobacco Scientific Director, bat-science.com Nov. 2013)

Methods

Analysis of internal tobacco industry documents (http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/)
- 455 relevant documents (covering period 1971-2009) analysed
- Focus on British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris International (PMI)

Analysis of secondary literature accessed via the British Library and internet:
- Company reports (BAT n=14, PMI n=9), investor presentations (BAT n=42, PMI n=47), Sustainability reports (BAT n=11) and corporate websites (bat.com, pmi.com)
- Reports on tobacco industry investments via Nexis UK (media) and industry journals
- Internet Archive Wayback Machine (search on bat.com 1996-2012)
- Euromonitors on developments and trends in the European tobacco market

Conclusions

1. TTC’s rhetoric on harm reduction is inconsistent with historical and recent TTC documents and action, both of which suggest that TTCs may have little intention of promoting snus use in a way envisioned by public health, as this would eat into their existing cigarette profits.
2. TTCs' snus investments have been defensive instead, turning snus from a threat (a product that might have competed with cigarettes) into a major opportunity: one that enables TTCs to claim a joint agenda with public health and to rehabilitate their reputation.
3. By investing in snus, and recently nicotine, TTCs are eliminating competition between cigarettes and lower-risk products, thus helping maintain the current market balance in favour of (highly profitable) cigarettes, while ensuring TTCs' long-term future should cigarette sales decline further and profit margins be eroded.

Policy implications

- Legalising snus sales in Europe may have considerably less benefit than envisaged and could have a number of harmful consequences.
- TTC investments in reduced risk products are likely to reduce the ability of reduced risk products to contribute to harm reduction and should be carefully monitored.
- TTCs should be prevented from using their investments in reduced risk products to undermine Article 5.3. of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which aims to protect public health policy from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.

Take home message:

The tobacco industry’s harm reduction discourse should be seen as opportunistic tactical adaptation to policy change rather than a genuine commitment to harm reduction. Care should be taken that this does not undermine gains hitherto secured in efforts to reduce the ability of the tobacco industry to inappropriately influence public health policy, or the ability of reduced risk products to reduce harm from tobacco.

Reference: