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)

- Tobacco harm reduction approach: lives can be saved if smokers switch from cigarettes to using nicotine in a less hazardous form.
- Public health divided on this issue: should a harm reduction approach involve reduced risk products such as smokeless tobacco (in particular Swedish snus) or e-cigarettes?
- Snus sales banned in Europe, except for in Sweden, but legislation currently under review.
- Transnational tobacco companies (TTCs) have argued that health gains can be gained if governments allow potentially reduced risk products like snus on the market.
- There are concerns that TTCs might market reduced risk products in a way that sustains rather than reduces smoking.

Objective: To explore the tobacco industry’s rationale for, and approaches to, reduced risk products and promoting harm reduction. Focus on Europe and smokeless tobacco.

Results

- TTCs’ interest in smokeless tobacco dates back to 1971 when BAT first started scoping opportunities in Western Europe in partnership with US Tobacco Company.
- Prompted by fear of declining cigarette sales, BAT considered smokeless tobacco to be a cigarette alternative (not replacement) for:
  - Smokers that considered quitting due to health concerns;
  - Smokers in smokefree environments; and
  - New generation of better educated not interested in smoking.
- Young people were a key target.

- Despite recognising the lower health risks of smokeless tobacco, TTCs did not invest until 2002 when a number of risks and opportunities coincided: Europe’s cigarette volumes started declining, smokefree legislation was an emerging threat, and public health first started showing interest in harm reduction triggered by the (US) Institute of Medicine ‘Clearing the Smoke’ report (2001) which investigated the feasibility of tobacco harm reduction.
- TTCs adopted the term ‘harm reduction’ from the IOM, and thereafter increasingly used the term in its corporate messaging. For example, BAT’s use of the term “harm reduction” in its ‘report (2001) which investigated the feasibility of tobacco harm reduction.
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- TTCs’ interest in smokeless tobacco dates back to 1971 when BAT first started scoping opportunities in Western Europe in partnership with US Tobacco Company.
- 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.
- 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.

Conclusions

1. TTCs’ 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:

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