



Citation for published version:

Peeters, S & Gilmore, ABC 2013, 'Understanding the tobacco industry's interests in smokeless tobacco and harm reduction in order to inform EU health policy', European Public Health Conference 2013, Brussels, Belgium, 14/11/13 - 16/11/13.

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

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Understanding corporations to inform public health: industry interests in harm reduction and reduced risk products

1 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 and promotes, 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.

3 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.
- Example: extract of a 1981 BAT Tobacco Executive Committee briefing, dated 21 September 1981, available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/hxf18a99>:

We have no wish to aid or hasten any decline in cigarette smoking. Deeper involvement in smokeless is strategically defensible. There are fewer people in sophisticated markets starting to smoke. There are increasing numbers of people giving up. There are increasing restrictions on smoking, particularly in public, whether by law or by society.

- 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 social reports increased from 2 in 2001/2 to 247 in 2010.
- Despite this messaging, we found no evidence that snus was central to TTCs' business strategies. Instead, documents and interviews suggest harm reduction offered TTCs two main benefits: reputation enhancement and an opportunity to (re) establish dialogue with, and access to, policy makers, scientists, and public health groups.
- Nevertheless, all TTCs now have a snus interest, leaving no major European snus manufacturer independent of cigarette interests, thereby reducing competition between snus and cigarettes.
- While far less evidence is available on nicotine-containing products and e-cigarettes, the TTCs recent investment in these products and statements that **"new 'would be smokers' begin with and stay with low risk product categories"** (BAT Investor presentation 2011), raise concerns that the TTCs may also be attempting to control this market.

2 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)
- Euromonitor reports on developments and trends in the European tobacco market

Stakeholder interviews

- 3 Swedish public health experts
- 4 tobacco industry representatives



4 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.

5 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:

Peeters S, Gilmore AB (2013) Transnational Tobacco Company Interests in Smokeless Tobacco in Europe: Analysis of Internal Industry Documents and Contemporary Industry Materials. PLoS Med 10(9): e1001506, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001506>.