

Opinion

PRO/CON: Are warning labels needed for e-cigarettes?

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff

03/31/2015



ProA dangerous product is being advertised as healthy

In 2014, the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year was "vape." Simply, it's breathing in water vapor through an electronic cigarette, or e-cigarette.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should take a hint from the dictionary. It should write its own definition of e-cigarettes. They contain nicotine, so it should define them as a tobacco product.

Congress created the FDA in 1906. The government was concerned then over the safety of America's food and medicine. At the time, food and drugs were filled with toxic dyes and preservatives. People were selling fake miracle cures known as "snake oil."

The agency was created to help people know if a product is safe and healthy.

The FDA was made to regulate products just like e-cigarettes.

Cotton Candy Flavor

E-cigarettes claim to be healthy. But there's no proof. Right now more than 16 million children can legally buy e-cigs. They can give themselves as much nicotine as they want. Nicotine is not harmless. Accidentally drinking liquid nicotine has caused a huge jump in poisonings. Two months ago, a toddler in New York state died from swallowing liquid nicotine.

And e-cigs are booming. Sales of e-cigarettes are expected to go up by four times by 2017.

The growth is partly because of advertising. The other reason is the increase in the number of high school students using them. The many types of e-cig flavors attract young people. Cotton candy, gummy bear and root beer are just some of them.

E-cigs should be regulated, not banned. The FDA is the only agency that can do that. The FDA should stop sales and advertising to kids. It should also make sure that health claims made by e-cig companies are true. Finally, it should make companies list what's in e-cig juice.

Sounds Harmless, But Isn't

“Juice” sounds harmless, but it's not. It is actually liquid nicotine. The liquid nicotine is heated inside the e-cig and turned into vapor. Then users breathe the vapor in and out. At least it's better than breathing burning tobacco. Burning tobacco releases thousands of chemicals, so e-cigs are safer than cigarettes.

Still, cigarettes kill 6 million people a year. They might be the deadliest invention in human history.

E-cigarettes could help. They could save millions of lives, but only if smokers switched from puffing to vaping, and then quit vaping.

The problem is that no one knows if e-cigarettes are healthy. Some people online claim e-cigs have helped them quit smoking. Yet it might just be a few people.

A new government study found something to worry about. It found that smokers often use both e-cigarettes and regular cigarettes. This shows that e-cigarettes don't help people quit smoking, and may actually make it harder for smokers to quit.

Nicotine Is A Poison

Still, e-cigarettes are often advertised as being healthy. Researchers at the University of California-San Francisco found that more than 9 out of 10 e-cig websites either claimed that they had health benefits, or hinted there were some. Two-thirds of websites claimed that they help users quit smoking.

This is false advertising. Nicotine is addictive and it is a poison. The FDA should make both of these facts clear by requiring warning labels on e-cigarettes and bottles of e-juices. Skin contact with even small amounts of liquid nicotine can cause dizziness, vomiting and seizures. Swallowing it can be deadly.

Right now, a dangerous product is being advertised and sold as a healthy one. This is exactly what the FDA exists to prevent.

E-cigarettes are not necessarily poison. But gummy bear, cotton candy and sour apple shouldn't make them easier for kids to use.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Sarah Milov is an assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia. She currently is writing a book about tobacco in the 20th century. Readers may write her at 435 Nau Hall South Lawn, Charlottesville, VA 22904.

This essay is available to Tribune News Service subscribers. Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of Tribune or Newsela.

CON: Don't treat e-cigarettes like tobacco cigarettes

In 1964, the government released its very first report on tobacco smoking.

It looked at scientific evidence from more than 7,000 articles on smoking and disease. Based on those studies, the report decided that tobacco smoking is a major cause of lung and throat cancer.

The report launched a “war on smoking.” It soon led to health warnings on cigarette packages. Cigarette ads were no longer allowed on radio and television. In recent years, smoking has been banned in some public places, like restaurants.

Over these 50 years of cigarette laws, two facts have been repeated over and over: 1) smoking tobacco kills people; 2) once a person is addicted to smoking cigarettes, or, really, the nicotine in cigarettes, it is very hard for a person to quit.

A Way To Stop Smoking

Then an invention came along — e-cigarettes. They supply nicotine in much the same way as a tobacco cigarette. Yet, they don't appear to cause cancer or lung disease. Many people cheered the new invention.

Finally there was a product that could help those who were addicted. People who had tried other ways of quitting now had another shot.

Lives could be saved. People could replace their tobacco cigarettes with e-cigarettes. Cigarette smokers inhale smoke and its carcinogens, like tar. Switch to e-cigarettes, and they'd just breathe water vapor. And that horrible smell would be replaced with just the light scent of a flavor like mint or strawberry.

Lives could be saved.

One would expect health professionals to be cheering loudly. But some people appear to be addicted to regulation and laws. Some even want to ban e-cigs.

A Ban Would Not Help

How do they go about banning a product that saves lives?

Many of these regulators are worried about “what ifs.” “What if” vaping turns out to be harmful? “What if” people who vape start smoking?

These “what ifs” are quite unlikely. However, they are the reasons people give for supporting bans. Some want bans on the sale of e-cigarettes. Others want to add grossly high taxes on them. Some even want total bans on the use of e-cigarettes in public.

But such policies mean nicotine addicts will be less likely to use e-cigarettes. Instead, they may be more likely to keep smoking tobacco. The obvious result will be more tobacco smoking and thus, more illness and death.

Mitch Zeller is the director of the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products. He made the key point clear: "People are smoking for the nicotine, but dying from the tar."

He says e-cigarette regulation should take into account that different nicotine products "pose different levels of risk to the individual." He believes they should be regulated according to their risks.

Smoking Is More Dangerous

Which means America should not treat e-cigarettes just like cigarettes. Smoking cigarettes is clearly far more dangerous than vaping.

In fact, vaping can help people to stop smoking. Because of that, we need carefully written rules. If it steers Americans from smoking toward vaping as a replacement, it will provide "an extraordinary public health opportunity," in Zeller's words.

Zeller makes a lot of sense. Then there are the regulation nuts. They want laws to treat e-cigarettes the same as the far, far more dangerous tobacco cigarettes. These people are the enemy of public health.

Smoking kills. Vaping is a safer alternative. Our nation's laws will save lives if they reflect this fact.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Amy Ridenour is chairman of the National Center for Public Policy Research in Washington, DC. (www.nationalcenter.org), a conservative think-tank on Capitol Hill. She can be reached at 501 Capitol Court NE, Washington, DC 20002 or by email at aridenour@nationalcenter.org, a conservative think tank on Capitol Hill. She can be reached at 501 Capitol Court NE, Washington, DC 20002 or by email at aridenour@nationalcenter.org.

This essay is available to Tribune News Service subscribers. Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of Tribune or Newsela.