



Editorial

Better Understanding Harm Reduction

This issue of *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* includes several studies on “harm reduction.” These address the multitude of questions and do so in a balanced and thoughtful manner. Given a large number of studies, here I focus on two of particular interest.

Cahn et al.¹ provide us with perhaps the most balanced, comprehensive, and thoughtful analysis of the issues. If one wants to learn about tobacco/nicotine harm reduction, this is the place to go. One theme throughout this article is the encouragement to *always* consider the relative risk of products compared with continuing smoking. Another theme is that of trade-offs; for example, it is very likely that promoting harm reduction will decrease smoking in adults but increase smoking in adolescents (ie, what ratio of quits to initiations is acceptable?). Does such a calculation include the fact that quitting produces immediate health benefits, but the effects of initiation are not realized for several decades? Should effects on children weigh more because they are traditionally thought to be more susceptible? This is a question that many of us have failed to address. Finally, the likelihood of induction of quit attempts by harm-reduction products is well-covered. In fact, the biggest effect of harm-reduction products may be that they reach the large majority of smokers not ready to quit by providing them with a stepping stone toward quitting. Successive approximations to the desired behavior is a well-validated change technique. It may be that our prior notion that quitting requires strong motivation is incorrect.

Ebrahimi Kalan et al.² and Mermelstein et al.³ comment on a prior study that used psychometrics to compare addiction to e-cigarettes with addiction to combustible cigarettes among dual users.⁴ This is a worthy effort for three reasons. First, it is doubtful whether dual users could reliably rate one versus the other. Second, continued addiction to e-cigarettes is clearly less harmful than continued addiction to combustible cigarettes. Third, several of the studies in this issue illustrate that, in order to better understand dual-use addiction, we need a much more detailed and long-term description of the natural history of dual use. One of the first goals of any investigation is to better describe the phenomenon. We know that motivation to quit smoking varies greatly from day to day. Consistent with this, my

anecdotal clinical observation is that many dual users are ambivalent about quitting smoking, start using with a reduction product and take a wait-and-see approach.

Ultimately, most of the prior clinical research has focused on helping the 10% of smokers who currently want to quit. I am heartened that we are finally trying to reach the other 90%.

Supplementary Material

A Contributorship Form detailing each author's specific involvement with this content, as well as any supplementary data, is available online at <https://academic.oup.com/ntr>.

Declaration of Interests

Dr Hughes has consulted with tobacco companies on harm reduction products.

John R. Hughes, MD[✉]

Departments of Psychiatry and Psychological Sciences, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA

Corresponding Author: John R. Hughes, MD, Departments of Psychiatry and Psychological Sciences, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA. Telephone: 802 9228163; E-mail: John.hughes@uvm.edu

References

1. Cahn Z, Drope J, Douglas C, et al. Applying the population health standard to the regulation of electronic nicotine delivery systems. *Nicotine Tob Res*.
2. Ebrahimi Kalan M, Ward K, Ben Taleb Z. Can we measure nicotine dependence in dual users of cigarettes and ENDS? *Nicotine Tob Res*.
3. Mermelstein R, Hedeker D, Rest E. Response to: can we measure nicotine dependence in dual users of cigarettes and ENDS? *Nicotine Tob Res*.
4. Rest E, Mermelstein R, Hedeker D. Nicotine dependence in dual users of cigarettes and e-cigarettes: common and distinct elements. *Nicotine Tob Res*.