Heated Tobacco Products (HTPs): Same dog, new tricks

Heated tobacco products (HTPs) are the tobacco industry’s newest way to keep people addicted to tobacco and attract new users, including young people. Tobacco companies have sought to market HTPs as “reduced risk” because the companies claim using the products does not involve burning or combustion, and they claim to market these products only to existing smokers. However, the industry has a long history of making false claims about the health risks of its products, most notably in the marketing of “light” and “mild” cigarettes that were no safer than other cigarettes. In addition, HTPs have been marketed around the world in ways that appeal to young people.

INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTP use carries less risk than smoking conventional cigarettes.
RESPONSE: The health impacts of HTP use are not yet well-established. Given these products’ relative newness and similarity to conventional cigarettes, there is no long-term impact research to support such “reduced-risk” claims. What is certain is that long-term exposure to the chemicals found in HTP emissions (such as nicotine, carbon monoxide, various aldehydes, and others) increase a person’s risk for a multitude of serious health issues including heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers.1-6 It is therefore reasonable to argue that long-term HTP use may lead to negative health outcomes and that these chemicals are so harmful to the human body that reducing exposure does not decrease one’s risk of disease in equal proportion. The “reduced-risk” messaging is highly reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s earlier attempts to mislead consumers into thinking “light,” “mild,” and “low-tar” cigarettes were less harmful.7 Internal tobacco industry documents show that tobacco companies deliberately promoted these cigarettes knowing they would provide false reassurance without any health benefits.7 As we now know, “low-tar” cigarettes pose a unique harm of increased risk of lung adenocarcinomas.8 Given that it took decades to uncover the full extent of the devastating health impacts of conventional cigarettes, the public should remain skeptical of “reduced-risk” and similar claims around HTPs until the health impacts of HTP use, both short and long term, are fully understood.

INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allowed Philip Morris International (PMI) to market its HTP, IQOS, as a “reduced risk” product, indicating that it is a safer alternative to smoking.
RESPONSE: This is a false claim. The FDA allowed PMI to market IQOS with “reduced exposure” information, which is not the same as “reduced risk.” The FDA website states, “Even with this action, these products are not safe, nor FDA approved.”9 The authorization does not allow PMI to make any other modified risk claims or any assertions that IQOS products are endorsed or approved by the FDA, or that the FDA deems the products to be safe for use by consumers.

In addition, the FDA’s authorization applies solely to IQOS, not HTPs generally, and includes only four IQOS products (IQOS system & charger, and three varieties of Heatsticks).9 Newer or different versions of IQOS products available globally are not currently included. Furthermore, no other government has a regulatory “reduced exposure” claim pathway for HTPs similar to the US. In fact, 182 governments have international obligations under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control that require HTPs, as tobacco products, be subject to the highest degree of regulation.10

INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTP marketing does not target young people or non-smokers.
RESPONSE: PMI first launched its HTP ‘IQOS’ in Japan and Italy in 2014.11 A brief look into PMI’s IQOS marketing in Italy disproves their claim that they do not market to
young people or people who have never smoked. The IQOS launch in Italy was extremely flashy, involving IQOS ‘Embassies’ and ‘Boutiques’ in major cities and vacation destinations throughout the country. At these sleek, trendy stores, young-looking staff engaged new customers through product tutorials and free trials, as well as promotional events and parties that appeal to a younger demographic. PMI also utilized various social media platforms and popular influencers with young followers to market IQOS to a wide audience. PMI’s tactics were effective; a 2019 study found that nearly half of all IQOS ever-users in Italy had never smoked conventional cigarettes. Furthermore, 619,000 non- or former smokers expressed intention to try IQOS in the future.

Investigations by Reuters and The Times revealed that both PMI and British American Tobacco’s (BAT) aggressive use of social media and young-looking influencers to market HTPs is a global pattern. For instance, the BAT-sponsored Instagram page for its HTP ‘glo’ features dozens of posts aimed at a younger demographic and includes product giveaways and chances to win free trips to Abu Dhabi, Ibiza, Milan, and other ‘party cities’. In addition, the page has various affiliated hashtags, one being #discoverGlo. The page features young influencers from around the world ‘discovering new passions with Glo’ as well as Glo device giveaways for ‘yourself and a friend.’ Together, the language and lifestyle, fashion, and music content imply the page is targeted toward new users. Marketing tactics designed to attract non-smokers further undermine the industry’s claim that HTPs are intended to be a “reduced-risk” product; on the contrary, non-smokers who initiate tobacco use with HTPs become at-risk for tobacco-related health harms.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTPs are integral to building PMI’s “smoke-free future” and BAT’s “a better tomorrow.”**

**RESPONSE:** Internal documents from PMI show that its primary motivation for creating IQOS and other ‘reduced risk’ products was to maintain profitability in the face of an increasingly hostile environment for conventional tobacco products. The reality behind the “smoke-free” tagline is that PMI seeks to distance itself from its role in the global tobacco epidemic, and recast its corporate image. Through new “reduced-risk” product lines, PMI and other tobacco companies retain customers and attract new ones. For instance, BAT places its tobacco and nicotine products along a ‘risk continuum’ where consumers are encouraged to shift among products rather than quit altogether.

These false displays of concern for public health are part of an industry-wide rebranding effort to improve public image, build credibility in the health and research sectors, and to achieve a more favorable regulatory environment for HTPs and other new products. The legitimacy of the claims to want a “smoke-free future” and “a better tomorrow” are undermined by the tobacco industry’s continued investment in their conventional cigarette brands and constant legal challenges of legislation that would effectively reduce tobacco use.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTPs are ‘smokeless’ products and should not be subject to the same regulatory framework as conventional cigarettes.**

**RESPONSE:** The tobacco industry uses this argument for several reasons. First, asserting that HTPs are ‘smokeless’ and therefore ‘safer’ creates the potential to circumvent the smoke-free laws that many countries, jurisdictions, and cities have fought hard to pass. Other tobacco control measures such as health warning labels, plain packaging, higher tax rates, and marketing restrictions may be undermined if HTPs are exempted from the regulatory frameworks applied to traditional smoked tobacco products.

Whether HTPs emit smoke or another aerosol is not as critical to public health as whether they emit harmful chemicals, and they do. Therefore, HTPs should be subject to the same regulatory framework as conventional cigarettes in order to limit exposure to toxic emissions for bystanders, including vulnerable populations.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: The tobacco sticks used in HTP devices are not cigarettes.**

**RESPONSE:** A heated cigarette — like those used in PMI’s ‘IQOS,’ BAT’s ‘glo,’ and KT&G’s ‘lil’ — has the same basic components as a conventional cigarette: compressed tobacco and a filter enclosed in a paper wrapper. Like conventional cigarettes, major heated cigarette brands are available in a variety of flavors and are sold in packs. Some are even co-branded with major cigarette brands like Marlboro and Kent. Tobacco companies insist that heated cigarettes are not cigarettes primarily to avoid the strict regulations and higher taxes placed on conventional cigarettes.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTPs help smokers quit.**

**RESPONSE:** According to the WHO, “There is insufficient independent evidence to support the use of [HTPs] as a population level tobacco cessation intervention to help people quit conventional tobacco use. HTPs contain tobacco, and the use of these products constitutes tobacco use, thereby contributing to the burden of tobacco in countries where they are sold.”
While the body of evidence on HTPs and smoking cessation is still fairly small, most studies have not found HTPs to be effective smoking cessation devices. On the contrary, most HTP users continue using conventional cigarettes as well as HTPs, rather than switching completely to HTPs. As a result, no country or jurisdiction has approved HTPs as a smoking cessation aid. In addition, no HTP has been approved by any regulatory body as a safe and effective nicotine replacement therapy, and no HTP manufacturer is marketing these products as cessation devices.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTPs fit into a harm reduction framework.**

**RESPONSE:** HTPs have no place in a harm reduction framework. They contain tobacco, and use in any form is dangerous. Furthermore, the health effects of HTP use are still not well-understood. Given these products’ relative newness and similarity to conventional cigarettes, it is irresponsible to assert that the reduced toxicant levels of HTP emissions (as compared to conventional cigarettes) translate to a reduction in harm risk. Cigarettes are a uniquely deadly product, so using them as a standard for comparison is not helpful for gauging another product’s relative level of harm. Finally, HTPs emit toxic emissions, expose users to toxic chemicals, and do not help smokers quit smoking.

**INDUSTRY ARGUMENT: HTPs and other new tobacco products are better for the environment.**

**RESPONSE:** This is a classic tobacco industry tactic known as “greenwashing.” Greenwashing refers to the practice used by controversial industries to market their goods and/or image as environmentally friendly to increase product sales and divert public attention from their own environmentally damaging practices. A 2017 WHO report documents the detrimental environmental impacts of every stage of the tobacco life cycle; tobacco farming, curing, product manufacture, distribution, consumption and post-consumer waste all damage the environment. Despite this, multi-national companies are still each producing hundreds of billions of cigarettes per year and none of their internal documents show intentions to proactively reduce production. HTP devices still use disposable tobacco sticks/pods and the devices themselves must be disposed. Disposal of electronic devices is known to be harmful to soil, water, and the atmosphere.

7. Bates, Clive & Rowell, Andy. (2004). Tobacco Exposed... The truth about the tobacco industry... in its own words. Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, UC San Francisco, University of California at San Francisco, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education.