

Let's talk e-cigarettes
Podcast 27, November 2023, Eve Taylor

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Transcript

Musical intro

If asking your mate down the pub about vaping is what they probably say, no one agrees if it's safer or not, so you might as well smoke anyway. Now what your mate needs is a Cochrane review. All the facts have been checked at least twice. They find there's a lot that the experts agree on might give you a different advice.

Speaker 2

Hi, my name is Nicola and I'm a researcher based at the University of Oxford in the UK.

Speaker 3

And I'm Jamie and I'm a researcher based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the United States.

Speaker 2

We are both members of the Cochrane Tobacco Addiction Group. Welcome to this edition of 'Let's talk e-cigarettes'. This podcast is a companion to a research project being carried out at the University of Oxford, where every month we research the e-cigarette research literature to find new studies. We then use these studies to update our Cochrane Systematic review of e-cigarettes for smoking cessation. This is called a living systematic review. In each episode, we start by going through the studies we've found that month and then go into more detail about a particular study or topic related to e-cigarettes.

Speaker 3

This month we ran our searches on the 1st of November 2023 in a nutshell. We found four new ongoing studies and one linked paper. The first of the new ongoing randomized trials, is led by Doctor Amanda Farley at the University of Birmingham in the UK. It's due to begin next March. So that's March 2024 and to recruit 1250 parties. It aims to compare the use of combination nicotine replacement therapies. So, for example, a nicotine patch alongside a short acting form of NRT and compare that to e-cigarettes in people living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, otherwise known as COPD. In that study, they'll measure the impact of these two interventions on COPD. Symptoms as well as on smoking behavior. The study is funded by the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Research. The second new ongoing randomized trial will also compare combination nicotine replacement therapy with the electronic cigarettes. It aims to recruit 438 participants. The study will be conducted in Pakistan by Strategic Healthcare Limited and it's due to begin in January 2024. It appears to be affiliated with the foundation for a Smoke free world which is linked to the tobacco industry.

Speaker 2

The third new ongoing study is the first we've seen of its kind. It's a six week randomised trial comparing e-cigarettes to nicotine pouches for quitting cigarette smoking. The flavours and strengths of the products used will also be varied. The study is being run by researchers at Yale University and is funded by the National Institutes for Health, both of which are based in the US. The study aims to begin in January 2024 and to recruit 256 participants, as it's a short term study, we'll

not use it to assess quitting in our review, but we hope to be able to look at it for safety. And then finally, the last new ongoing study is being carried out by the Rose Research Centre, which is a private research facility in the US affiliated with the Foundation for a Smoke free world which as Jamie mentioned, it has been linked to the tobacco industry. The study aims to recruit 325 people who smoke, who will all be given four weeks of nicotine replacement therapy to quit smoking. At the end of that treatment, those who have not quit will be randomly assigned to a group that receive either e-cigarettes or nicotine pouches based on their preference or to a group that receive more nicotine replacement therapy. The study will measure change in carbon monoxide levels over 10 weeks, and that study was due to start mid-November 2023, so hopefully that one is already up and running.

Speaker 3

Awesome. It's exciting to see more studies in the pipeline and particularly some that are looking at nicotine pouches which up till now have been rarely studied when compared to nicotine e-cigarettes. So, though I am speaking to you from the US a couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure of being back in England and seeing many of my wonderful British colleagues and attending the E-cigarette Summit in London, there I had the pleasure of interviewing Eve Taylor from Kings College, London, about work she's doing on e-cigarette packaging, and you get to hear more about it in this month's deep dive.

If you could start by telling us. A little bit about yourself. What got you into e-cigarette research?

Speaker 4

So, I'm Eve Taylor. I'm a PhD student at Kings and I initially got into e-cigarette research through my masters. So, I did my masters at Kings and addictions and I did my Masters project looking and evaluating the TPD nicotine. Health warning labels on e-cigarette.

Speaker 2

Obscure science term definition. Nicotine health warning labels were introduced by the European Union and from May 2017 it was required that all nicotine vaping products have a warning that reads: 'This product contains nicotine, which is a highly addictive substance'.

Speaker 4

With Ann McNeill and then as everyone who does the addictions Masters, you do you do a research position, position. You fall in love with the group and then you end up doing a PhD.

Speaker 3

Awesome. Thank you. And what can previous research on cigarette packaging tell us about e-cigarette packaging options so?

Speaker 4

There's a long history of different cigarette packaging kind of steps that have been taken, so we currently have standardised packaging in the UK where packs have to be in the same olive green and they have to use. The same fonts. And they can't have certain information on them. However, it did take a long time to get here. So initially cigarette packs had to remove certain descriptors, so you couldn't have things like fresh or mild on packs. And this happened in kind of like the 80s and the 90s. And then health warning labels were added, just text ones and then eventually pictorial health warning labels were added. And then finally, the standardised kind of colouring and standardisation of font was added and it's been found with each of these steps that they've reduced the appeal of cigarettes to young people, but also made them less desirable to adults as well.

Speaker 3

Can you describe to international listeners how e-cigarettes are currently packaged in the UK.

Speaker 4

So there is lots of regulation around how e-cigarette packaging has to look, but it's more around information that has to be on the packs, so there has to be a warning label that says nicotine. I think it's something along the lines of 'nicotine is an addictive substance' and that was put in by the European Union and there are similar ones in the US and in Canada. That was slightly different warnings, but you need to have information on kind of nicotine level, other ingredients, list manufacturing addresses, things like that. There's also regulation around claims you can't make, so you can't make health claims on packaging. And then there are some more conceptual things that you can't say. So you can't say that a product is revitalising, or that it suggests that it's revitalising. However, that's quite hard to define or identify particularly. Yes, there are some more conceptual regulations, but they're very hard to enforce.

Speaker 3

Awesome. And just for our international listeners, can you talk me through what it's like like walking into a corner shop here? Can you see e-cigarettes? Can you see cigarettes?

Speaker 4

Yes. So I'd say pre 2021, so kind of pre COVID. So, cigarettes are currently they can be sold in corner shops but they have to be hidden behind like an opaque screen. And there's just like a list kind of maybe on the counter of the products that they sell. Well, so you have to know that you'd wanna walk in and say, can I have a 20 pack of something. E-cigarettes used to be kind of displayed possibly at point of sale, sometimes behind the till if you're in a bigger supermarket like boots or if you're in Tescos or something, they're generally on the shelves near the nicotine replacement therapy. Since disposables have come in. We've seen a lot bigger point of sale displays, especially in little corner shops, there's all the pretty bars are now kind of stacked up in the corner shops and that's quite a recent development in the UK.

Speaker 3

Awesome, thank you. So tell us now you can be as quick or as extensive as you want about the research you've done into packaging options for e-cigarettes and what you found.

Speaker 4

Yeah. So we've done a range of studies using data from action, Smoking and Health.

Speaker 2

Action on Smoking and Health, otherwise known as ASH, is a public health charity set up by the Royal College of Physicians to end the harm caused by tobacco.

Speaker 4

And also from ITC project.

Speaker 2

The ITC project is defined as the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project. It is the first ever international cohort study of tobacco use.

Speaker 4

So, among youth and among adults, so we found using the ASH data that if you kind of standardize a pack, so if you show young people and adults either branded packs or standardised white packs or standardised green packs using the same green as a cigarette package that young people are less

interested in trying the packs which are in standardised colours. However adults, there's really no difference, so adults really show little difference in saying that they'd be interested in trying a pack that's branded compared to standardised and importantly, there's not an effect among adults who smoke either, so we don't think that if you did standardise or kind of reduce some of the branding elements on e-cigarette packaging, it would be unlikely to dissuade smokers. However, this is just based on the one study. And then we've done some other ones looking e-liquids finding similar results. However, we did find that when you showed young people standardized e- liquids so in either or white or green pack, they were more likely to have misperceptions around the relative harms of e-cigarettes of that particular e-liquid compared to cigarettes. And we also found that if you limit the kind of flavor descriptions that can be used, so lots of the time you have quite cool, cool and funky flavour names, so you know you might have Raspberry Ripple Galaxy instead of just Raspberry. So, for one example we had one, I think there's Cherry Lemonade and we limited it just down to cherry and lemon. Actually, by reducing the descriptors that can be used for flavour, we also found that reduced the appeal among young people, but also reducing the scriptures that are used for brands. So that was reducing it down from moreish puff candy dropped I think was the name of the brand. And then when we standardised it in the images we just called it like vaping liquid RT72 or something like that and that seemed to have an extra effect on top of the standardization of reducing the appeal among young people.

Speaker 3

Awesome. And did anything you found so far surprise you in this?

Speaker 4

Yeah, I think I was quite surprised that there was not much effect among adults because I think I thought was a bit of an opportunity cost here that we might be dissuading some of the appeal among young people. It might also dissuade adults. However, we do really need to address the fact that these products are currently marketed and packaged the way they are. However, again, it's only one study. But it was a sample of 12,000 adults. Yeah, it was a large population, and I was quite surprised that, yeah, changing the packaging really didn't dissuade adults from having an interest or not having an interest.

Speaker 3

It's quite reassuring. Yeah. Yeah. OK. And what do you think should be done next in terms of e-cigarette packaging?

Speaker 4

So I think next, I mean the classic academic response would be great to have some more research out there always would be.

Speaker 3

Always would be.

Speaker 4

But I think there is a real opportunity now especially with it's kind of in the interest of government. It's part of the zeitgeist at the moment. So we really need to pounce on that, and we need to make sure that there is probably some stricter regulation around how packaging looks. Is this going to mean standardized packaging or is this going to be kind of somewhere in the middle between standardising and just limiting what brands can put on there? However, it's really important that whatever regulation is put in place needs to be very clear and is very easily enforceable and also kind of easily put into action by industry. Because if it's kind of a bit more conceptual or if there's loopholes, or if it's a little bit unclear. It's actually gonna be very hard to regulate and enforce.

Speaker 3

Absolutely. Alright. Thank you so much.

Speaker 2

Well, that was a really relevant topic to some of the decisions being made by different governments all around the world at the moment, Jamie and what we're seeing obviously is with the increase in young people vaping, there's a lot of thought that does need to be given to how we kind of curb that increase and. A knee jerk reaction obviously would just be to ban particular products, but we know. That there is the potential that there could be knock on effects of that, especially as we know that e-cigarettes help adults to quit smoking and we don't want these products to not be available to to adults.

Speaker 3

That's right. And actually, some people talk about disposable e-cigarettes, which are the thing that everyone is concerned about at the moment, being in some ways a response to what happened when further restrictions were placed on previous products, like Joules. So we do have to be aware, too, of far reaching consequences when it comes to banning products and also of what that means in terms. Of harm perceptions among people. If they can't access an e-cigarette, but they can access traditional combusted cigarette, what does that mean and and how do they make sense of that?

Speaker 2

Yeah, I think that's a a really good point, Jamie. The states is often a good place to look at at these kind of issues because different States have different regulations on things, so. So I was looking at a study recently that was run by Professor Abigail Friedman at Yale School of Public Health, and they looked at the impact of a ban on flavoured tobacco products in San Francisco, which included some flavoured vapes, and they found that that ban was actually associated with increased smoking among high school students relative to other school districts where this ban wasn't in place, though, there it could be the case that if these products are made less desirable than more people go to smoking, and that isn't necessarily just adults, that could also be young people, so it's really, really tricky issue and real extreme caution I think needs to be used. And as Eve says, that just means that more research in this area is vital.

Speaker 3

Yeah. I loved hearing about the research. Eve and her team were doing at the conference. There was a lot of interesting discussion around disposables and potential policy responses, and I'm sure this is going to be a space where we have more to talk about in the future.

Well, that is it from us. Thanks so much to everyone for listening. We're going to take a break next month over the winter holidays, but we'll be back with you in January to talk more about e-cigarettes. Please subscribe on iTunes or Spotify and stay tuned for our next episode.

Musical outro

Vaping is safer than smoking may help you quit in the end. But remember to mention the findings we have can't tell us what will happen long term, even though we know vaping is safer than smoking, we may still find cause for concern, if you're thinking about switching to vaping do it. That's what the experts agree. Smoking so bad for you they all concur that vaping beats burning there's much to learn of effect long term yet to be seen.

Speaker 3

Thank you to Jonathan Livingstone-Banks for running searches to Ailsa Butler for producing this podcast and to all of you for tuning. In music is written with Jonny Berliner and I and performed by

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