

The Editor
The Observer

17 October 2022

Dear Sir/Madam

The New Nicotine Alliance represents consumers of low-risk alternatives to cigarettes such as vaping products, nicotine pouches, smokeless and heated tobacco products. As consumers, we have a direct interest in the regulation of these products and the personal and public health consequences of policy choices made by the government. We have no conflicts of interest concerning the tobacco, nicotine or pharmaceutical industries.

We are extremely disappointed to note that you saw fit to publish an anonymously written opinion piece as an editorial on 16 October which regurgitated cherry-picked research and innuendo favoured by reactionary activists who are ideologically opposed to vaping as a means for helping smokers to quit. We have numerous concerns.

Firstly, it is well-known that the tobacco industry attempted to deflect attention from the harms of its products when they became undeniable in the 1960s. They paid scientists, doctors and public health researchers to produce materials which would mislead the public and perpetuate smoking. This behaviour led to their being described as “merchants of doubt” and rightly being subject to condemnation by society. Today, ideological anti-vaping activists are copying the Big Tobacco playbook from the 1970s and employing the same tactics to sow doubt and confusion as to the huge potential reduced risk products such as e-cigarettes have in tackling smoking-related disease and death. Arguably, their behaviour is worse than that of industry because public health actors are largely trusted by the public and well aware of the far safer nature of non-combustible products but choose to exaggerate apocryphal and hypothetical risks instead. It is sad and shameful that the Observer has chosen to amplify their mischief.

Secondly, your editorial promotes tired arguments from aforementioned bad actors in the public health community, failing to even refer to a comprehensive report by the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), published on 29 September, which confidently re-asserted that vaping is at least 95% less harmful than smoking. Running to 1,468 pages, [OHID's latest review](#) was a deep investigation into the literature which concluded that Public Health England's 2015, 2018 and 2020 reviews were still broadly accurate. It was [welcomed by tobacco control experts](#) and represents the most serious examination of the data ever to have been undertaken. Critics of the 95% figure still stubbornly try to pretend that the estimate was created by one item of research, instead of the 185 studies reviewed by McNeill et al in 2015, and the many hundreds of others which have featured in updated reviews since. If the Observer wishes to be seen as an honest and

intellectual news broker, why is it promoting wild conspiracy theories of cranks instead of the work of highly respected academic experts in the tobacco control field?

Thirdly, the editorial continually references the World Health Organisation's Q&A on e-cigarettes. This has been thoroughly debunked over the years, with former Director of Action on Smoking and Health, Clive Bates, [highlighting how every assertion is flawed](#) and describing it as fake news. It is worth noting that the WHO is sponsored by Michael Bloomberg, an ideologically driven anti-vaping advocate who has spent close to \$1bn to spread misinformation about vaping across the world.

Fourthly, we are curious as to why this editorial has surfaced right now and the motivation behind it, considering it rehashes all the same flawed arguments so beloved of anti-vaping deniers. We note that the Guardian and the Observer have regularly published paid-for articles by Vital Strategies, an organisation funded by Bloomberg to sow confusion and doubt about tobacco harm reduction. Would the Observer similarly print the opinions of heavily financed anti-vaxxers or climate change deniers if it meant a few extra shekels for the business?

Fifthly, around one in seven adults in England still smokes, and smokers are overrepresented in deprived communities, in sub-populations with low income, poor education and employment status, and among those with various forms of disadvantage, such as mental health problems, homelessness, prison experience, and substance use. The Guardian and Observer consider themselves champions of the less well-off and downtrodden, so we are confused as to why this editorial trumpets doubt fostered and funded by a rich white American billionaire which can only serve to deter people in lower socio-economic groups from making better decisions for their health.

Sixthly, UK public health organisations such as ASH and Cancer Research UK have long been frustrated that the public perception of the relative risk between smoking and vaping is misunderstood. Latest [ASH research](#) estimates that a third of smokers incorrectly believe vaping is more or equally as harmful as smoking. The blame lies with irresponsible articles in media aiming for click-bait recognition over and above objective and educated journalism. It is very sad that the Observer has sunk to such a level of tabloid ignorance in the subject area and is contributing to a misperception which can only protect the cigarette trade.

Lastly, the author or authors of the editorial should recognise that there are politics at play to which they have succumbed to being a patsy. E-cigarettes and other alternatives to smoking pose an existential threat to those whose careers depend on the harms of smoking. Grants, university departments, journals, conferences, advocacy campaigns and the personal prestige of activists have harm as their foundation. This creates strong, perverse incentives to fabricate potential downsides to lower-risk products. This Observer editorial protects the careers of rent seekers to the detriment of public health and, for reasons mentioned above, will perpetuate combustible tobacco use amongst those in poorer communities. Far from being responsible and progressive journalism, the Observer is "punching down" on the neglected and disenfranchised to satisfy a well-paid elite.

There is little recognition in the Observer editorial of this. Instead, your position as a respected news organisation has been muddied by a curiously timed anti-health tirade masquerading as concern. You have ignored and criticised experts in the field, bowed to wealthy vested interests, treated comprehensive peer-reviewed research as irrelevant and arrogantly ignored those who may be adversely affected by the ignorant outlier opinions you have promoted.

In nearly 20 years since the modern e-cigarette was invented there have been no serious health harms identified from vaping anywhere in the world, yet you choose to spread doubt, confusion and myths just as Big Tobacco did half a decade ago.

The latest research by ASH estimates that there are now 4.3 million vapers in Great Britain, over half of whom have quit smoking entirely thanks to vaping products. The biggest declines in smoking have occurred since vaping went mainstream in 2012. Professor John Britton, who leads the tobacco advisory group for the Royal College of Physicians has described vaping as "a massive potential public health prize." As consumers whose lives have been transformed by reduced risk products, we hope you will reconsider your position so that many more can benefit from healthier lives as we have done. You are on the wrong side of history, please do better.

Yours sincerely



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Chair
New Nicotine Alliance



Sarah Jakes
Trustee
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