



SNUS – DECADES OF RESEARCH INDICATE THAT SNUS IS SUBSTANTIALLY SAFER THAN SMOKING - SO SHOULD IT STILL BE BANNED IN THE EU?

By Marina Murphy, BAT

POTENTIAL TO SAVE EUROPEAN LIVES?

These days, governments always seem to be under the cosh, so it is pretty amazing that when there is an opportunity to take credit for something extraordinary that they don't do it. Or at least, the Swedish government seems very reluctant to 'get behind snus' as Clive Bates, a well-known harm reduction advocate puts it. He recently wrote to the Swedish government questioning their reluctance to not only take credit for what, he says, by any standards, is 'an extraordinary public health achievement', but on their reluctance to do anything about ensuring that the rest of the EU might benefit.

You may remember in the last issue, I wrote about a case being brought to the European Court of Justice by the New Nicotine Alliance (NNA), and the Swedish Match legal challenge of the current EU ban on snus (except in Sweden). Well I think it's worth revisiting this issue, given

that new results released in June reveal that around 320,000 men would not die prematurely every year in the EU if snus was [widely and lawfully] available, and use levels mirrored those in Sweden. Now it is highly unlikely that use levels in other European countries would mirror those of Sweden any time soon, or maybe ever, but if snus were available, it would add to an ever-increasing arsenal of potentially safer nicotine and tobacco products. This could only be a good thing for smokers looking for an alternative to conventional cigarettes that works for them! Because after all, we're all different and one size does not fit all! The more safer nicotine products there are to choose from, the better! And surely the point is, safer products should be available to those who want to use them?

HUMAN COST

The new results I mention were presented by Professor Lars Ramström from the Institute of Tobacco Studies, Täby,

Sweden, at the recent Global Forum on Nicotine conference in Warsaw in June. He told delegates that the availability of snus could have a significant impact on the burden of tobacco-related disease in the EU – as mentioned above, potentially to the tune of 320,000 lives per year.

'This new analysis reveals the true human cost of the European snus ban,' says Professor Gerry Stimson, who is on the board of directors of the NNA. 'Snus is at least 95% safer than smoking' and it protects against smoking. This ban on the sale of snus contravenes a fundamental principle that EU law should be based on a high-level of health protection. The ban means that smokers in the EU outside of Sweden are denied the right to choose this safer product to avoid smoking,' he says.

These might be new results, but what is not new is this line of argument. There are decades of data in respect of snus use available from Sweden. And those in the know have come to call the phenomenon – higher snus use, lower smoking rates, lower incidences of some forms of cancer/related death rates – the 'Swedish experience'. But it seems snus researchers are in the position of having to prove their point over-and-over again. When is enough evidence, enough evidence? With what looks to be such an encouraging example of success (of an alternative product over conventional cigarettes not being acknowledged by either regulatory bodies or many of the public health community, without a change in attitude, it's hard to see how



Snus is a smokeless powdered tobacco product that can be loose or in a pouch and is used by placing under the upper lip.

newer products that offer an alternative to smoking could gain support from regulators and the wider public health community!

EU TRENDS

Current legislation does not allow snus to be marketed in any European country, except Sweden. It is also used a lot in Norway, because of course Norway is not in the EU. And Finland, being a neighbour of Sweden, has reasonably high levels of snus use compared to other EU countries, despite snus not being lawful for sale there.

Snus use is more popular than smoking in Sweden. Its availability is thought to have led to a significant reduction in smoking, and, as a result, smoking-related diseases, with the 2017 EC Eurobarometer survey showing that only 5% of men in Sweden are daily smokers, compared to the European average of 24%. Swedish men have Europe's lowest level mortality considered to be attributable to tobacco, 152 per 100,000 compared to the European average of 373 per 100,000. (see table 1).

There are currently 28 countries in the EU, plus Norway is 29. The burden of tobacco-related disease and death across these 29 countries varies considerably. You can see from Figure 1, where deaths are sorted, according to death rate per 100,000 attributable to tobacco – all causes, Sweden is in the outlier position at the very bottom with a death rate less than a fourth of the top rate and less than half of the EU average. This is, despite, the fact that overall, tobacco use in

Sweden (including smoking, snus and other tobacco products) is higher than in many other countries in the EU. But where Sweden differs is that most tobacco use is in the form of snus and it has the lowest smoking rates in Europe, and, thus keeps the position of the lowest death rate, as it has done for many years.

What is also clear from this table is the marked difference between Eastern and Western European countries. Eastern European countries exhibit death rates above the EU average (of 373 per 100,000), whilst all Western European countries, except Belgium, death rates below the EU average. What is also notable is what is going on at the bottom of the table and who is keeping Sweden company in the lowest positions. Finland, Norway and Austria rank 3rd, 4th and 5th from the bottom. What do they have in common with Sweden? At least in part, it may be because consumer use of snus in those markets is higher than in most other European countries.

Now Clive Bates is calling on the Swedish government and institutions to play a leading role in calling the Commission to account for the EU ban on snus. He says: 'This is one of the worst policies ever devised by the EU, and this

prohibition persists, despite a mountain of compelling evidence that snus is highly beneficial where it is permitted. There is now an opportunity to address this policy failure by responding constructively to a legal challenge to the prohibition in the European Court of Justice.'

It's not the first time the Commission has had the opportunity to revisit this ban. The 2014 revision of the Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) also afforded an opportunity to do something. There was a huge public response to the consultation – 82000 citizens responded, of whom 8 out of 10 favoured lifting the ban. But as Chris Snowden from the Institute of Economic Affairs puts it: 'The European Commission ignored one of the biggest responses to an EU consultation ever. There was an urge to do something - anything - about a product that they didn't understand and which was changing even as they were working on the directive. They flatly ignored all the evidence on snus [and were cloth-eared to the evidence on vaping]. The result was a random hotch-potch of arbitrary regulations which have set back tobacco harm reduction by years.'

We don't have long to wait to see what the European Commission's response will be this time!

EVEN MORE NEW RESEARCH ON SNUS:

It has been well known for years that Swedish men have been reported to have the lowest rates of disease considered to be attributable to tobacco in Europe. But many have suggested that this is all very well, but claimed snus was linked to an increased risk of developing pancreatic cancer. Now, a study by the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, using pooled individual data from the 'Swedish Collaboration on Health Effects of Snus Use, shows that snus use is not thought to be implicated in the development of pancreatic cancer in men. They say tobacco smoke constituents - other than nicotine or its metabolites - may therefore account for the link made between smoking and pancreatic cancer. Interestingly, these results appear to contradict previous results by the same institution claiming that there is a link between snus and pancreatic cancer.

