

Marketers of electronic cigarettes Should halt unproved therapy claims

Medicine

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GENEVA -- Contrary to what some marketers of the electronic cigarette imply in their advertisements, the World Health Organization (WHO) does not consider it to be a legitimate therapy for smokers trying to quit.

"The electronic cigarette is not a proven nicotine replacement therapy," said Dr Ala Alwan, Assistant Director-General of WHO's Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health Cluster. "WHO has no scientific evidence to confirm the product's safety and efficacy. Its marketers should immediately remove from their web sites and other informational materials any suggestion that WHO considers it to be a safe and effective smoking cessation aid."

The typical electronic cigarette is made of stainless steel, has a chamber for storing liquid nicotine in various concentrations, is powered by a rechargeable battery and resembles a real cigarette. Users puff on it as they would a real cigarette, but they do not light it, and it produces no smoke. Rather, it produces a fine, heated mist, which is absorbed into the lungs.

Developed in China in 2004, the electronic cigarette is sold there and in numerous other countries, including Brazil, Canada, Finland, Israel, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Marketers of the electronic cigarette typically describe it as a means to help smokers break their addictions to tobacco. Some have even gone so far as to imply that WHO views it as a legitimate nicotine replacement therapy like nicotine gum, lozenges and patches.

But WHO knows of no evidentiary basis for the marketers' claim that the electronic cigarette helps people quit smoking. Indeed, as far as WHO is aware, no rigorous, peer-reviewed studies have been conducted showing that the electronic cigarette is a safe and effective nicotine replacement therapy.

WHO does not discount the possibility that the electronic cigarette could be useful as a smoking cessation aid. The only way to know is to test.

"If the marketers of the electronic cigarette want to help smokers quit, then they need to conduct clinical studies and toxicity analyses and operate within the proper regulatory framework," said Douglas Bettcher, Director a.i. of WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative. "Until they do that, WHO cannot consider the electronic cigarette to be an appropriate nicotine replacement therapy, and it certainly cannot accept false suggestions that it has approved and endorsed the product. "

The WHO Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation is scheduled to address the electronic cigarette, among other topics, 12-14 November 2008 in Durban, South Africa. Convened by WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan, its mandate is to advise her on scientifically sound and evidence-based recommendations to the Member States about tobacco product regulation.

For information about WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative visit: <http://www.who.int/tobacco>.