

EU Tobacco Products Directive: an interview with Professor John Britton

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Please could you give a brief introduction to the EU Tobacco Products Directive?

The EU Products Directive is intended to regulate tobacco products to protect consumers and reduce harms to health that come from using tobacco.

What are the main aims of the EU Tobacco Products Directive?

At one level it is just to restrict the way tobacco can be used and marketed. At the wider level the objective should be to reduce the harm to society from all tobacco use.

So, on the first level it's about practical issues such as, for example in earlier versions of the directive, yields of [nicotine](#) or tar, and the use of health warnings on packs; but the wider purpose should be to shape the way that tobacco and other nicotine products are used in society and how to prevent or reduce the harm that they cause.

Why is the restriction of tobacco companies' promotion of cigarettes and smokeless tobacco so important?

A restriction on promoting tobacco is extremely important because tobacco is a very harmful product. There is very clear evidence from decades of practice that advertising products makes people aware of them and maybe want to try them, and to identify with particular brands. Preventing young people from starting smoking, preventing smokers who've quit from going back to smoking, and removing stimuli to smoke for existing smokers is very important to individual and public health.

Tobacco promotion is banned to try to minimize adverse effects on consumers. The smokeless restriction is more controversial; smokeless tobacco is much less hazardous than smoked tobacco, so on the one hand there is the argument that smokeless use is a risk to health and so should be prevented, and the other, the practical consideration that smokeless is a far healthier option for people who would otherwise smoke.

Why is the EU's revised Tobacco Products Directive close to stalling?

As I understand it is because of allegations of misconduct, but I am not aware of the full story on this.

What impact could this delay have?

Well, within the Tobacco Products Directive there were some very important provisions to do with plain packaging in particular. Plain packaging is a very important part of smoking prevention policy and it would be a massively powerful step if the European Union could move towards plain packaging. So that component of the Directive, I think, was especially important and it would be nice to see that brought into practice.

There are other areas of the Directive, and I haven't seen it - I am only speaking from what I have heard I might expect from it - where the Directive was looking at reducing access to alternative nicotine products. Depending on

how that was presented and put into practice, it could be a good thing, could be a bad thing.

Alternative nicotine products such as e-cigarettes have great potential as healthier alternatives to smoking, without most of the controversy of smokeless tobacco, but need some form of regulation to protect consumers. So prohibition of alternative devices would in my view be a bad thing, but some light touch regulation to allow safe products onto the market would be very good.

What do you think the future holds for the EU Tobacco Products Directive?

I would hope that the Tobacco Products Directive could go out to consultation as soon as possible because we need to see what was proposed and be able to comment and maybe adapt it if there's anything in there that could be improved.

Would you like to make any further comments?

Tobacco regulation is crucial to public health and it is important that it brings in a level of regulation on nicotine products that relates to, or is proportional to, the level of harm they do in society. At the moment our tobacco policy tends to give a pretty free reign to tobacco, which kills half of all users, and is very restrictive on alternative [nicotine](#) products which don't. It would be nice to see some rational measures within that spectrum of controls to encourage smokers and all nicotine users to either quit nicotine use altogether, or, if they can't stop using nicotine, to move on to using safer products.

In the UK, we are moving towards a more open market on nicotine products which will make alternative [nicotine](#) devices more freely available to users. That, I think is a model which the European Union could perhaps look to.

Where can readers find more information?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence have just published guidance on harm reduction strategy, so that may be of interest to readers: <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=folder&o=61197>

About Professor John Britton

John Britton is director of the UK Centre for Tobacco Control studies.

