

E-cigarettes: Public Health England's evidence based confusion?

Your Editorial¹ about the scientific value of David Nutt and colleagues' multicriteria decision analysis² (from which the quote "e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than combustible tobacco" derives), authors' lack of expertise, and potential conflict of interests (COI) requires clarification.

Multicriteria decision analysis is a form of decision conferencing, which has been validated as a process enabling a group to outperform even their best members.³ Decision conferencing has been applied in thousands of projects, especially in cases about an uncertain future for which data do not yet exist.⁴ Although there are better ways to provide relative risks estimates in nicotine containing products (NCPs), the perfect data required to compare their relative harms are simply not available. Consequently, we turned to multicriteria decision analysis to produce a meaningful estimate of the relative harms of NCPs. Nonetheless, equating harm with toxicity is an oversimplification. In the multicriteria decision analysis paper,² intrinsic toxicity at individual level and the amount of use at population level contribute only to a portion of the overall harm. This should be clarified in the Public Health England report on e-cigarettes.⁵ Moreover, that "e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than combustible tobacco" may well change with evolving product design. When we engaged in the multicriteria decision analysis in July, 2013, our knowledge about e-cigarettes was mostly restricted to so-called cigalikes. Innovation will probably reduce these residual risks to as low as possible by adopting new technologies and applying ad hoc safety and quality standards.

The group's judgment is important for the iterative scoring process

leading to an agreed level of harms for the NCPs under scrutiny. By dismissing participants expertise, the *Lancet* Editorial seeks to undermine the value of the multicriteria decision analysis. The reality is that participants formed a multidisciplinary group with relevant and complementary expertise. Among them a behavioural pharmacologist (who was Past President, Society for Research on Nicotine & Tobacco), medical doctors (including Chair of South African Medical Association and Past President of the World Medical Association), a lawyer with expertise in tobacco control, an eminent toxicologist, plus others with extensive publications on nicotine and tobacco.

The Editorial then launches into an ad hominem attack on myself for having consulted for an e-cigarette distributor to design a randomised controlled trial.⁶ It is ironic that *The Lancet* is more concerned about my temporary involvement with a small-size e-cigarette company that went out of business than with my pharma fundings. Most importantly, this COI has nothing to do with my participation in the multicriteria decision analysis process. Clearly, the Editorial tries to discredit the scientific value of the multicriteria decision analysis paper by raising irrelevant COI issues on one of the authors. Moreover, there were no COI guidelines for e-cigarette research when our pioneeristic studies were initiated. Extension of tobacco industry COI to e-cigarettes emerged only last year when WHO decided to embrace the concept of equating tobacco smoking to vaping. Consequently, e-cigarette researchers have being retrospectively accused for something they did not even know they could be held liable for. This is ridiculous. The nature of these problems is simply ideologic, with harm reductionists versus precautionary principle supporters presenting opposing views on e-cigarettes.

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Riccardo Polosa
polosa@unict.it

Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Catania, Catania, Italy

- 1 The Lancet. E-cigarettes: Public Health England's evidence-based confusion. *Lancet* 2015; **386**: 829.
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- 3 Nutt DJ, King LA, Phillips LD, on behalf of the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs. Drug harms in the UK: a multicriteria decision analysis. *Lancet* 2010; **376**: 1558–65.
- 4 Dodgson JS, Spackman M, Pearman A, Phillips LD. Multi-criteria analysis: a manual. Department for Communities and Local Government: London, 2009. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/12761/> (accessed Sept 1, 2015).
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- 6 Caponnetto P, Campagna D, Cibella F, et al. Efficiency and Safety of an electronic cigAreTte (ECLAT) as tobacco cigarettes substitute: a prospective 12-month randomized control design study. *PLoS One* 2013; **8**: e66317.



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