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Session 11: Current state of tobacco harm reduction and ways forward

Tobacco harm reduction (THR) efforts are impeded by a number of factors. One of the biggest challenges is "bad" science—data have been misinterpreted or misused, particularly in the United States. In addition, current regulation has been badly designed, making it difficult for new entrants to the market. Communication about harm reduction potential still lacks uniformity. While health authorities in the United Kingdom, for example, think it important that smokers understand the risks of both combustible cigarettes and e-cigarettes, there is no communication of risk to consumers in the U.S.

Public perception of risk in tobacco products is affected accordingly. Thirty-seven percent of U.S. users think that e-cigarettes are as harmful as or worse than combustible cigarettes. The figure is much lower in the U.K. Similarly, more than 90 percent of the U.S. population thinks that smokeless tobacco is as hazardous as or even more hazardous to health than traditional smokes. Other factors impacting negatively on THR include advocacy, with the main advocacy in the U.S. being prohibitive, and ideology. Particularly in the U.S., public health is driven by moral considerations, while rational ones come second, one of the discussants argued.

Also, there is no clear perspective among public health advocates of what THR implies. While previously there was the general opinion that most intervention was required to prevent tobacco use, the latest default model also includes nicotine use, suggesting the ideal intervention is to extinguish nicotine altogether.

With the advent of reduced-risk products (RRP), more models and theories were developed. Today, the THR continuum, as one panelist termed it, ranges from the view that RRPs are a plot to undermine decades of tobacco/nicotine control to the idea that the bar should be set high and elevated if necessary for the approval of RRPs. Observers who wait and see represent the middle of the continuum, followed by those curious about the new products and, at the far end of the scale, those admitting that RRPs are the miracle they have been waiting for.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the discussant said, was particularly obsessed with the question of whether youth would take up vaping and then switch to something harder—i.e., smoking—and with dual-use stickiness.

The fact that the FDA, unlike the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, sees the tobacco industry as a legitimate stakeholder in the regulatory process gives rise to cautious optimism. The industry, however, needs to enhance transparency, build trust and prove that things are different today from the days of the "tobacco wars" from the 1960s to the 1980s. The question is: Who shall make the first move and admit that the tobacco industry is going down the THR road and doing the right thing?

Consumers have a right to know about less harmful products and need to be able to make informed decisions. A tobacco-free world by 2040 as envisaged by the World Health Organization is only possible if science-based, consumer-acceptable products are available around the world.