

Are E-cigarettes really 95% less harmful than traditional cigarettes?

Introduction

Read any blog posting or the comment section for any article about electronic cigarettes and you will find the statement that e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than traditional cigarettes. But is it true?

In a nutshell, best estimates show e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful to your health than normal cigarettes, Public Health England (I underlined “your health” for a reason which I will explain later).

While I agree that vaping is less harmful than smoking, I disagree with the figure of 95% that is used. The source used to support this number is from a report commissioned by Public Health England. This quote is on page 5 in the foreword and few read beyond that page to see the source behind the source - i.e the original research.

Unlike the United States, Public Health UK in England has embraced the use of electronic cigarettes to help smokers quit traditional cigarettes. Their justification for saying that electronic cigarettes are 95% less harmful comes from this paper.¹

Twelve experts in tobacco were given the task of scoring 12 different nicotine containing products using a multi-criteria decisional analysis (MCDA); which was created to estimate the harm of psychoactive drugs to both the individual and to society. The products were scored under 14 different criteria: 7 were “harm to the user” and 7 were “harm to others”. Traditional cigarettes were given a value of approximately 100% and the rest of the nicotine containing products were judged against this. Below is a graph showing the analysis of how electronic cigarettes (ENDS) are deemed to be 95% less harmful than cigarettes (a relative score of 5% harm).

From this graph you could also conclude that small cigars (second item from the left) are about 35% less harmful than traditional cigarettes also (scoring about 65% relative harm compared to traditional cigarettes). No responsible person in tobacco control would make the statement that small cigars (cigarillos) are 35% less harmful because when talking about harm, we are talking about “harm to the user”, rarely, if ever, have I seen harmful effects for cigarettes include “harm to others”. Now let’s look at the graph breaking out the “harm to user” vs the “harm to others”.

The graph shows that only cigarettes were given any scoring in “harm to others”. Just looking at “harm to users”, we now see that small cigars and cigarettes are given about the same score of 67%. If we remove the scoring of “harm to others” from cigarettes and now compare that to ENDS (e-cigarettes), the “harm to user” now increases by threefold to about 15% instead of 5%.

I said I would explain why I underlined “your health” in the original quote from Public Health England and that is because they did not say.

“In a nutshell, best estimates show e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful to your health AND TO OTHERS than normal cigarettes.”

So are electronic cigarettes 95% less harmful or 85% less harmful

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to the user? The answer is that we just don’t know for sure. These figures come from the *opinions* of tobacco control experts and are subject to interpretation.

What is also never mentioned is the conclusion reached by this report.

While I do feel that eventually there will be a place in cessation for ENDS, more research needs to be done about the harm to the user, especially concerning the flavorings. Even Public Health England agrees that much is still unknown (Figure 1–4).

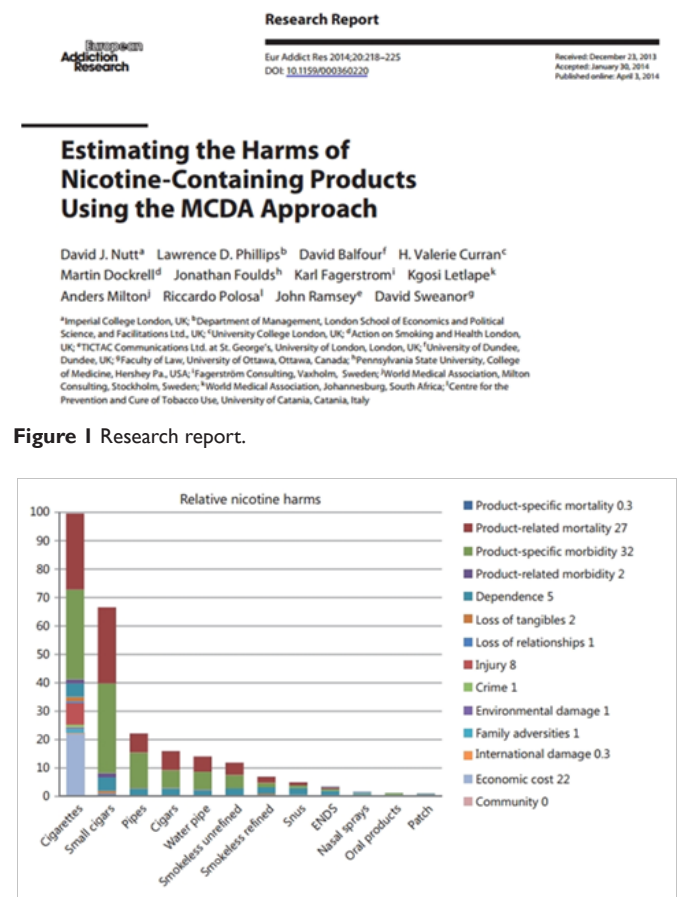


Figure 1 Research report.

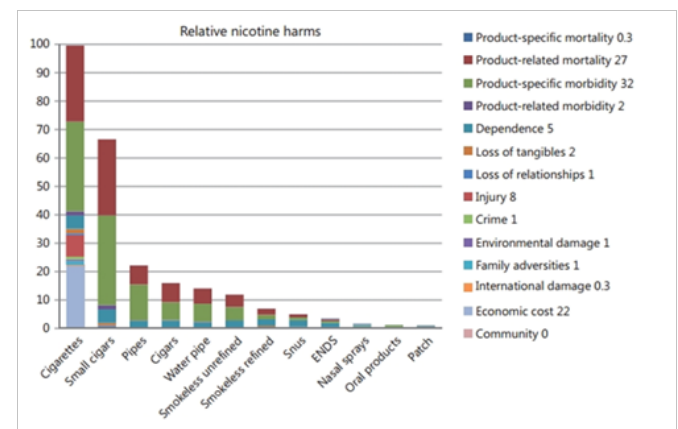


Figure 2 Relative nicotine harms.

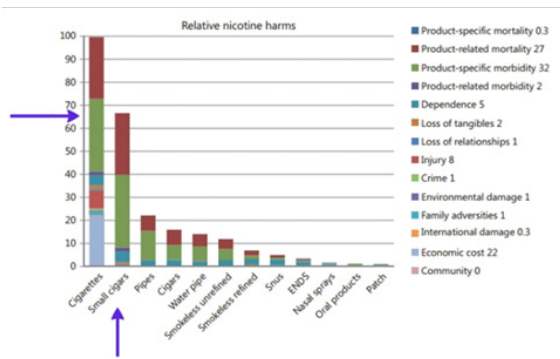


Figure 3 Relative nicotine harms.

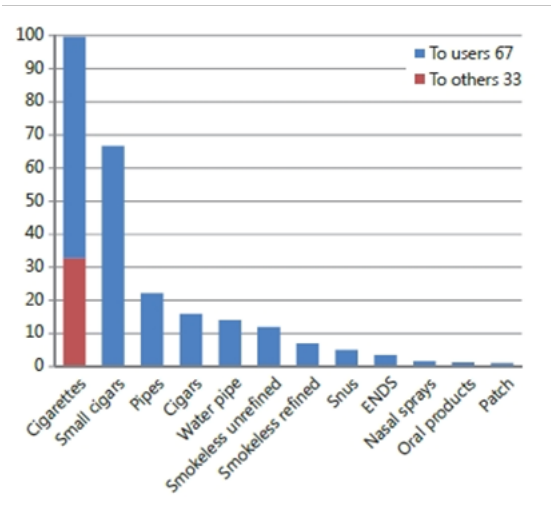


Figure 4 Harm to others and harm to users.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Nutt DJ, Phillips LD, Balfour Df, et al. Estimating the harms of nicotine-containing products using the MCDA approach. *European addiction research*. 2014;20(5):218–225.