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SRNT Comment on National Cancer Institute Monograph 13: Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Measured Yields of Tar and Nicotine

11/26/01

The Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) is composed of 700+ of the world's leading scientists in the areas of tobacco and nicotine research. SRNT regularly provides the US FDA, WHO and others with scientific expertise need for tobacco policy.

This National Cancer Institute monograph evaluates the health effects of cigarettes advertised as "light" and "low tar." The main conclusion, namely that there is no health benefit of light cigarettes, as compared to their regular brand counterparts, is based on an extensive review of state-of-the-art science relevant to the topic. The science base for the report is extensive and includes decades of research on trends in tobacco use and disease, studies of how people smoke cigarettes and how much tar and nicotine they actually expose themselves to, and the impact of light cigarette marketing on the perpetuation of smoking by individuals.

Although the report may appear to challenge the findings of Surgeon Generals Reports from the 1960s to the 1980s, it actually provides a perspective for considering both the wisdom and the limitations of earlier findings. Specifically, based on observations that the risk of lung cancer and several other smoking caused diseases was directly related to the level of exposure to tobacco toxins, several Surgeon General's reports concluded that smoking cigarettes that were lower in tar and nicotine deliveries was preferable to smoking cigarettes with higher tar and nicotine exposure levels. The important, and prescient, qualifier was that smokers not undermine the potential benefit of lower toxicity cigarettes by smoking more of them or by inhaling more smoke from each one.

Two important facts that are now apparent were not considered by health officials in these earlier reports: (1) that the powerfully addictive effects of nicotine that could drive smokers to inhale larger amounts of "reduced toxin" smoke to sustain their intake of addicting levels of nicotine, and (2) the ability and willingness of the tobacco industry to develop cigarettes that were designed so as to facilitate the ability of cigarette smokers to readily obtain substantially higher doses of tar and nicotine than were measured in the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) method cigarette test that was used to compare cigarettes on tar and nicotine deliveries. With nicotine addiction as a driving biological force, and cigarette design as an enabling factor, it now appears that cigarette smokers who smoke light cigarettes are obtaining sufficient tar and other toxins to produce a similar level of disease as is produced by cigarettes advertised as "full flavor" or "regular" cigarettes.

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A further complication, addressed by the NCI report is that the marketing of "light" cigarettes may undermine public health efforts to prevent the initiation of smoking by reducing concerns about smoking, and such marketing may similarly undermine public health efforts to foster cessation among existing smokers as if they turn to light cigarettes instead of quitting. Resolution of this issue is more complex but it appears that light cigarettes have impeded prevention and cessation efforts. Because the overall level of smoking caused disease is related to the overall number of smokers, cigarette products that undermine prevention efforts can thus contribute to the maintenance of the high prevalence of tobacco caused disease at a national level. Similarly, because tobacco disease risk is related to both daily level of exposure to toxins and the years of exposure, cigarette brands that delay the achievement of cessation can contribute to maintenance of a high risk of disease even if they deliver lower levels of toxins.

The report raises both regulatory and scientific challenges. From a regulatory perspective, it is clear that a means of appropriately evaluating the toxicity of products, and then communicating this information to consumers in a way that is accurate and without unintended consequences (such as undermining prevention and cessation) is critical. From a scientific perspective, it is clear that there must be an expanded commitment of research to better understand the impact of cigarette design, ingredients, and manufacturing techniques affect the toxicity and propensity to use the products (including their addictiveness), to provide a scientific foundation for recommendations that will lead to a reduction of risk of disease for people who continue to smoke cigarettes, while not undermining national efforts to prevent smoking and support cessation. As the NCI monograph shows, even the most well intended and rational appearing of policies may be flawed but if they are implemented in the context of an ongoing program of research, then unintended consequences may be more quickly detected and the policies adjusted to maximize benefits.

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