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E-CIGARETTES

Some inventions are so simple you have to wonder why no one has come up with them before. One such is the electronic cigarette. Smoking tobacco is the most dangerous voluntary activity in the world. More than five million people die every year of the consequences. That is one death in ten. People smoke because they value the pleasure they get from nicotine in tobacco over the long-term certainty that their life will be damaged. So it seems rational to welcome a device that separates the dangerous part of smoking from the nicotine. And that is what an e-cigarette does. It uses electricity from a small battery to vaporize a nicotine-containing solution, so that the user can breathe it in.

E-cigarettes do not just save the lives of smokers: they bring other benefits too. Unlike cigarettes, they do not damage the health of bystanders. They do not even smell that bad, so there is no public nuisance, let alone hazard, and thus no reason to ban their use in public places. Pubs and restaurants should welcome them with open arms.

No wonder the e-cigarette market is growing. Though still small compared with that for real smokes, it doubled in America last year and is likely to do so again in 2013.

Who could object? Quite a lot of people, it seems. Instead of embracing e-cigarettes, many health lobbyists are determined to stub them out. Some claim that e-cigarettes act as “gateways” to the real thing. Others suggest that the flavourings sometimes added to these cigarettes make them especially attractive to children.

In some places politicians are listening. Several countries restrict the sale of e-cigarettes, for example by classifying them as medical devices; others ban them altogether. Some airlines ban passengers from using e-cigarettes on their planes.

This is wrong. Those in charge of improving public health should be promoting e-cigarettes, not discouraging their use. Of course, e-cigarettes should be regulated. Nicotine is an addictive drug and should be kept out of the hands of children. E-cigarettes should be sold only through licensed outlets and to adults.

The right approach is not to denormalise smoking, but to normalize e-smoking. Those who enjoy nicotine will be able to continue to use it, while everyone else will be spared both the public-health consequences of smoking and the nuisance of other people’s smoke. What’s not to like?

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