

Review of: "Youth Patterns of Use of Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) Use, Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) Waves 4 – 5.5"

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The world of Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems, including e-cigarettes, is a world where misperceptions are rivalled by the proliferation in the number of devices themselves. As a result there is a need for strong evidence as to the nature of the products that are being used, the extent of their use, and the impact of that use. Within that context this paper is very welcome providing a succinct summary of the most recent epidemiological data on the use of these devices by young people within the U.S. The national studies reviewed in this report are show a clear picture of declining levels of e-cigarette use by young people- that pattern will be welcomed by many including those working within public health and those working within the ENDS industry. Why should the latter be so pleased with a clear decline in the use of their products by young people you might ask? The answer is that there is no issue that has so comprehensively shaped the regulatory environment of these products than the growth in their use by young people. Within the U.S., and to an extent elsewhere, concerns around youth use of nicotine delivery products has driven the regulatory environment and has charged the ENDS industry to do whatever it can to reduce levels of youth use of their products. In the light of that commitment the data reported in this paper showing reducing levels of ENDS use by youth will be very welcome. But things gets a lot more complicated when one seeks to look beyond the national survey data presented. We know, and have known for many decades, that people start smoking in their teens and form an association with a product that will in due course have such disastrous consequences on their health. It is within the context of that knowledge that we need to set the epidemiological data reviewed here. Yes it may be encouraging in general that levels of ENDS use by youth is decreasing but should we not be discomforted if, within the context of a reduction in ENDS use, there are youth who are continuing to initiate smoking combustible cigarettes for whom ENDS products would be substantially less harmful. Of course the difficulty here is one of knowing which early youth smokers could benefit from using ENDS as an alternative to smoking and which youth initiate their ENDS use as a prelude to their eventual smoking. The need here then, and this is where the current paper has less to offer, is to understand the details about how, and why, and in what contexts young people initiate ENDS use. The need is for qualitative studies to supplement the national prevalence surveys summarised here so that we have an informed epidemiological understanding of both the national pattern of ENDS use by young people and the determinants of those behaviors. Recognising this is not, I should add, a criticism of the current paper since the authors acknowledge the shortcomings of the data covered by the national surveys- including the lack of information on the prevalence with which individual ENDS products are being used. The point here is rather that we need

to do much more by way of combining both an epidemiological focus and a qualitative interpretive focus to understand both what is happening, the rate at which it is happening, and why it is happening. We need to better identify those young people for whom ENDS use is actually a legitimate arena of harm reduction, and those for whom ENDS use is a likely prelude to other forms of nicotine consumption, including smoking.