

# Review of: "Philip Morris International used the e-cigarette, or vaping, product use associated lung injury (EVALI) outbreak to market IQOS heated tobacco"

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**Potential competing interests:** The author is a full-time employee of Philip Morris International

## Authors' Latest Response Reconfirms Their Initial Errors

I appreciate the Authors taking the time to reply to my second response to their Article. However, their latest reply[1] continues to ignore identified and self-acknowledged failings in the Article and offers nothing additional to support their original, flawed conclusion. The Authors provide two new sources in an attempt to back up their original assertions, but a closer look at these materials shows that they too do not support the Article's original conclusion and title. In fact, they strongly support the view we put forward in our initial response that other confounding factors which the Authors have systematically ignored (notably PMI and Altria merger talks) were the most likely cause of any increase in media references to IQOS during the time frame in question.

Firstly, the authors quote business journalists Jennifer Maloney and Allison Prang writing in the Wall Street Journal[2] and cite their comment that *"vaping fears in U.S. should give a boost to the recent launch of its IQOS smoking alternative"* as an alleged proof point that PMI was using the News Article[3] published on PMI.com to promote IQOS. These are the words of Ms. Maloney and Ms. Prang, not PMI, and they note that they were reporting what *"Philip Morris finance chief Martin King said on a conference call Thursday with analysts"*. The journalists are referring to PMI's Q3 2019 Earnings Call ("Earnings Call"), which took place on October 17th, 2019. We sourced the Earnings Call transcript through Refinitiv[4] (note that we make complete transcripts publicly available on our website for 30 days after Earnings Calls). During the scripted remarks[5], which are still publicly available on our website, "EVALI", "vaping" and "illness" were not mentioned or alluded to in any way. In addition to our business performance, the prepared remarks recapped on several IQOS news items relevant to investors, all of which were mentioned in our initial reply to the Authors[6]. During the Q&A portion of the Earnings Call, Martin King—who was PMI's Chief Financial Officer at the time—was asked by a senior analyst from Cowen & Company, about PMI's optimism for IQOS in the United States particularly *"in light of growing concerns around potential health effects with liquid e-vapor"*[7] (the analyst's words). In addressing the differences in growth between the United States and other PMI IQOS markets, Mr. King responded: *"And it probably won't be as quick as, say, Japan or Korea started out where they were -- it was a phenomenon, and it kind of took off on us. So we'll see, right? It's*

early days, but we have heightened expectations given the news flow that's happened in the U.S. if you're a smoker and considering alternatives". Mr. King was addressing a direct and specific question from a reputable third-party analyst at an investor briefing which was part of the normal course of business for a publicly traded U.S. company. It had nothing to do with the News Article on PMI.com, which the authors continue to cite as the keystone of their argument. Nor can this brief response to an investment analyst's question, which referenced only *"the news flow that's happened in the U.S."*, be characterized as an "earned media strategy".

As a second alleged proof point, the Authors cite an article from the business section of the Irish Times[8] published on the day PMI and Altria announced that proposed merger talks were over. The authors decontextualize the Irish Times piece to make it appear as if our then CEO's comments were in relation to IQOS and EVALI. The Irish Times piece actually said:

*"A person familiar with the situation said PMI decided to walk away after it became apparent the US government crackdown on vaping could have a negative impact given Altria's stake in Juul."*

*"André Calantzopoulos, PMI's chief executive, said the two companies had decided to focus on the US launch of IQOS, PMI's heated tobacco product, which, the companies noted, had been authorised by the US Food and Drug Administration following a 'rigorous science-based review'[quotes used in the original] and was not an e-vapour product."*

PMI did not provide an interview or statement to the Irish Times in relation to this media story, a fact that the Authors could easily check by contacting the journalists. The comment attributed to André Calantzopoulos therefore presumably stems from the journalist's own views on our press release[9] announcing an end to PMI/Altria merger talks that we cited in our original response—in fact the Irish Times article quotes directly from that release. If anything, this news piece proves not that the Authors are correct in their conclusion, but that our own hypothesis that the end of merger talks announcement is the most likely explanation for any increase in references in the media to IQOS around 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019. Neither of these new alleged proof points link to the PMI News Article, which the authors originally cited as the primary factor in their hypothesis. The media articles are either based on an investor earnings briefing or an official PMI press release, which in both cases, PMI has a legal obligation to complete as a publicly traded company. Simply speaking, they are not marketing and not part of an earned media strategy. Finally, in their concluding remarks the authors call on the FDA to *"investigate the statement PMI published and subsequent news coverage"* and for the tobacco control community to *"invest in surveillance"* and *"research on the potential impacts"* of *"industry speech"*. They seemingly wish to do this for the purpose of lobbying governments to pass new laws controlling and curtailing free speech. It is extremely troubling that the Author's response to justified criticism of a poorly conceived and flawed piece of academic research is to double down on calling for censorship of others, rather than acknowledging their errors. We again call on the authors to substantially amend the Article's text and title, which is demonstrably false and misleading, or retract it in its entirety to prevent others from citing the published inaccuracies. We note that the original Article was subject to "internal peer review" and that the senior author is Deputy

Editor of the Tobacco Control Journal. To ensure that our legitimate concerns about the Article are considered in an unbiased manner, we suggest that the Editor assign a suitably qualified and independent reviewer who can evaluate the veracity of the claims made by the Authors in their Article and subsequent responses.

- [1] <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/15/tobaccocontrol-2021-056661.responses#our-primary-assertion-is-not-impacted-by-the-limitations-in-our-statistical-analyses>
- [2] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/philip-morris-lowers-earnings-outlook-11571316194> Note: the Authors did not provide a reference, however, this appears to be the news article they refer to.
- [3] <https://www.pmi.com/media-center/news/lung-illnesses-associated-with-use-of-vaping-products-in-the-us-the-facts>
- [4] <https://www.refinitiv.com/en> (subscription required)
- [5] <https://philipmorrisinternational.gcs-web.com/static-files/167cbe0e-c8ec-4322-93ec-189b30be4b78>
- [6] Moira Gilchrist. (2021). Review of: "Philip Morris International used the e-cigarette, or vaping, product use associated lung injury (EVALI) outbreak to market IQOS heated tobacco". Qeios. doi:10.32388/NLZDBR. (supplementary data)
- [7] Philip Morris International Inc. Earnings Call OCTOBER 17, 2019 / 1:00PM, Q3 2019
- [8] <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/manufacturing/vaping-clampdown-kills-off-altria-philip-morris-reunion-1.4030301> Note: the Authors did not provide a reference, however, this appears to be the news article they refer to.
- [9] <https://philipmorrisinternational.gcs-web.com/static-files/78a6afb3-107d-4e8f-ad11-b66e94b8a4b8>