

Tobacco Control News

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Calling out Big Tobacco: Indigenous Voices on 'Harm Reduction'



Hi TIS Teams!

This month, I'm excited to share a new paper written by a group of Indigenous academics and allies from Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Turtle Island (United States of America).

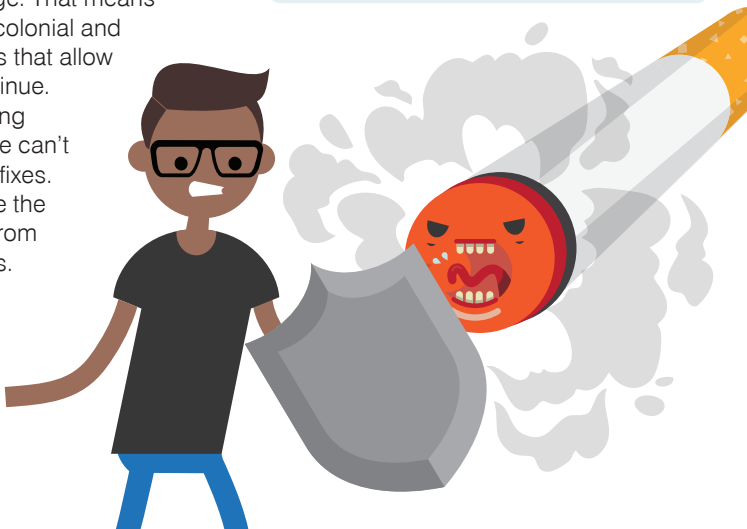
This important paper calls out how the tobacco industry uses dirty tactics to mislead the public, protect its profits, and interfere with public health action. By using terms like "harm reduction" and vague promises of a "smoke-free" future the industry tries to make its products seem safer than they really are. These tactics are designed to confuse people, create doubt, and undermine the work of public health programs like TIS. They do this by trying to look like part of the solution by changing what "smoke-free" means. But the products they're pushing instead of commercial cigarettes are still highly addictive – and addiction itself causes harm.

This is how the tobacco industry perpetuates colonisation. By promoting addiction, confusion, and nicotine dependence – especially in Indigenous communities – they continue the colonial systems of control and exploitation. Hiding behind terms like "harm reduction," the industry tries to make its activities sound like public health. But this is a distraction. They reframe structural and commercial determinants of health as personal choices, while pushing products like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches to hook new users and boost profits.

We've known for over 70 years that commercial tobacco kills. Yet the industry still aggressively markets these harmful products, putting profit ahead of people's lives. To stop this, we need real structural change. That means breaking down the colonial and commercial systems that allow these harms to continue.

The impact is ongoing and unequal, and we can't reduce it with small fixes. It's time to dismantle the systems that profit from addiction and illness.

You can read my in-depth review of this paper below.



World Health Organization (WHO) Science in 5: Expert insights in just 5 minutes!

Science in 5 is WHO's longest-running podcast series, sharing expert insights on the latest scientific facts, public health issues, and global health trends.

In May, they released an episode called "The Tobacco Trap", which looks at how the tobacco industry continues to sell death and destruction – using flavours, packaging, and advertising to attract young people and new consumers. This message aligns closely with this year's World No Tobacco Day theme: "Unmasking the Appeal" of the Tobacco Industry. You can watch the podcast episode [here](#).

What are commercial determinants of health?

Commercial determinants of health are how businesses influence our health – for better or worse.

The tobacco industry sells products that cause illness and death but keeps promoting them to make money. They use advertising, lobbying, and new products to keep people buying tobacco, harming public health.

Awareness of this is important, because everyone has the right to good health and these businesses make it harder for people and communities to stay healthy. We need strong action to stop these harmful commercial practices and protect communities from tobacco-related diseases.

TIS Team Take Home Message

Big tobacco uses dirty tactics and misdirection to keep people addicted. They promote products like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches using words like "harm reduction" and talk about a "smoke-free future", but their goal isn't to help people quit. It's to protect profits and keep people hooked, especially in communities already harmed by tobacco. When the industry talks about "harm reduction" this isn't care – it's control. We need to push back and call out this dishonest behaviour.

This paper is a strong reminder of the power of the TIS program. TIS teams can lead the way by:

Calling out industry tactics: speak up about misleading marketing, especially when it targets Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Truth telling: products like e-cigarettes still cause harm and are not risk-free

Advocate for change: meet with local MPs, councils, or health leaders to push for change that protects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to good health

Lead the resistance: empower local voices, especially Elders and young people to speak out about quitting, stand strong against the tobacco industry's colonial tactics, and help drive momentum towards the Endgame

Monitor local trends: be the eyes and ears on the ground to track what products are being used, how they're marketed, and where support is needed most



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In depth Paper Review

Maddox, R., Heris, C., Waa, A., Teddy, L., Upton, P., Nez Henderson, P., Kornacki, C., Rodriguez, J., Lee, J., Tautolo, E. S., Martinez, S. A., Bradbrook, S. K., & Kennedy, M. (In Press.). Colonial harm in new packaging: Indigenous critiques of the tobacco industry's 'harm reduction' rhetoric. *Health Promotion International*.



This paper explores the harms caused by commercial tobacco use and its role as a tool of colonisation. The authors discuss how the tobacco industry co-opts public health language, using terms like “harm reduction,” “reduced risk,” and “smoke-free” to misleadingly market products such as e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches. The paper also outlines the wider social and structural factors that allow the sale and promotion of these harmful products including misinformation, industry lobbying, inadequate tobacco control policies, and limited access to cessation support. The authors call for significant change to uphold Indigenous rights to good health and protect communities from ongoing industry harm.

Key Points

- Colonisation first damaged the sacred relationship between the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and the tobacco plant, then used this sacred plant to exploit Indigenous communities across the world under the guise of goodwill. In Australia tobacco became a tool of addiction, used to break cultural ties and connection to Country – encouraging the exchange of land and cultural artefacts.
- The tobacco industry corrupts public health initiatives like Aotearoa (New Zealand)’s Tupeka Kore movement, by narrowing the focus to tobacco smoking alone. In New Zealand this has allowed the tobacco industry to create new markets for alternative nicotine products, such as e-cigarettes.

- The tobacco industry undermines Indigenous people’s efforts to pursue wellness, self-determination and sovereignty. It exploits nicotine addiction to reduce peoples’ control over their own health and lives.
- Ongoing structural factors support the sale and promotion of harmful commercial tobacco products. These include misleading advertising, marketing targeting young people, industry lobbying, weak tobacco control laws, and limited access to quit support. Change is needed across all levels to put people’s health above the profits of the tobacco industry.
- Genuine harm reduction strategies such as nicotine replacement therapy, smoke- and nicotine-free environments, plain packaging, higher tobacco taxes and tighter advertising restrictions have successfully reduced disease and death from commercial tobacco use.
- The tobacco industry has sought to expand its portfolio into the pharmaceutical sector, including [investment in businesses](#) that produce respiratory devices such as asthma inhalers. It has also tried to position nicotine-based products as therapeutic solutions, when in reality products like e-cigarettes are highly addictive.
- The tobacco industry twists language to suit its agenda. It makes vague claims about striving for a ‘smoke-free future’ or ‘reducing harm’ – yet continues selling commercial tobacco products that kill.
- Raising awareness, recognising tobacco industry tactics, and creating evidence-based policies are essential to ending the harm caused by the tobacco industry, yet do not go far enough. Only structural change that dismantles the system that allows the tobacco industry to profit from disease and death will protect people’s right to good health.

What does ‘harm reduction’ in public health really mean?

Harm reduction means helping people stay safer while they work towards overcoming an addictive behaviour like smoking tobacco that is damaging their health. NRT products like patches and gum help people addicted to nicotine to quit smoking by providing nicotine without the harmful chemicals found in cigarettes. Unlike commercial tobacco and e-cigarettes, NRT is not designed to be addictive. It provides nicotine at a slower rate and in lower doses than in cigarettes and vapes, offering a safer way to manage nicotine cravings and withdrawal symptoms and so providing a stepping stone to complete cessation. In contrast vapes are manufactured to be as addictive as possible.

What is the Tobacco Endgame?

The Tobacco Endgame is a public health strategy that aims to end the tobacco epidemic – not just reduce smoking rates, but completely eliminate the harm caused by commercial tobacco.

It goes beyond helping individuals quit. Instead, it focuses on changing the systems, laws, and environments that allow the tobacco industry to keep operating and profiting from addiction. The Endgame is about long-term, bold action. It recognises that tobacco use is not an individual choice, but the result of decades of industry influence, colonisation, and commercial exploitation. Ending tobacco harm means dismantling the power of the tobacco industry and changing the whole system that allows it to exist.

