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Lorena Verduci, Associate Editor

BMC Public Health

By email: [bmcpublichealth@biomedcentral.com](mailto:bmcpublichealth@biomedcentral.com)

August 7, 2023

Dear Ms Pafitis, Ms Verduci

**Expression of concern about the proposed retraction of Foxon et al. paper regarding the relationship between smoking prevalence and e-cigarette use among US adults**

We write as experienced academics and experts in tobacco science and policy with no relevant competing interests concerning the tobacco or ENDS industries. We refer to the paper by Foxon et al. and the journal's apparent intention to retract this paper.

Foxon, F., Selya, A., Gitchell, J., & Shiffman, S. (2022). Population-level counterfactual trend modelling to examine the relationship between smoking prevalence and e-cigarette use among US adults. *BMC Public Health* 2022 22:1, 22(1), 1–10. DOI [10.1186/S12889-022-14341-Z](https://doi.org/10.1186/S12889-022-14341-Z)

The study provides analysis that supports an important public health insight – that smoking prevalence has dropped faster than expected based on population trends and that this accelerated decline is correlated with increased e-cigarette use. While the paper is not and cannot be conclusive about causation, it adds to a diverse body of suggestive evidence, including from trials, other population data, observational studies, and economic data that imply that e-cigarettes may be displacing smoking in the US adult population, with potentially significant public health benefits. This is not a novel perspective or a self-serving industry talking point. This prospect was highlighted in a 2021 essay by fifteen former presidents of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco, the relevant scholarly society.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential that the public health community understands the interactions between cigarette and e-cigarette use. Misunderstanding this relationship could lead policymakers, practitioners, and the public towards foreseeable but harmful unintended consequences, such as increased smoking.

We were concerned, therefore, to learn that BMC Public Health may retract this paper. We have seen the commentaries and correspondence below and do not see a case for retraction or correction at this time.

- Retraction Watch, Exclusive: *Public health journal says it will retract vaping paper for questions authors say were addressed in peer review*, July 27, 2023. <https://bit.ly/44RqIQy>
- Michael Siegel, Visiting Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine, Tufts University. *Medical Journal Retracts Vaping Study for Political, Rather than Scientific Reasons*. July 28, 2023. <https://bit.ly/446qg7v>
- Foxon, F. Supplemental materials: Correspondence re: BMC Public Health article 24 May to 23 July 2023. Published July 27, 2023. <https://osf.io/xd8y>

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<sup>1</sup> Balfour, D. J. K., Benowitz, N. L., Colby, S. M., Hatsukami, D. K., Lando, H. A., Leischow, S. J., Lerman, C., Mermelstein, R. J., Niaura, R., Perkins, K. A., Pomerleau, O. F., Rigotti, N. A., Swan, G. E., Warner, K. E., & West, R. (2021). Balancing Consideration of the Risks and Benefits of E-Cigarettes. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(9), 1661–1672. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306416>

The authors appear to have addressed the various concerns raised in their responses to the pre-publication peer reviews and their sensitivity analysis, which shows that the findings are robust under a range of initial assumptions.

We are aware of the authors' role as consultants for Juul Labs Inc., not least because it has been transparently disclosed by the authors throughout the editorial review process. The reported conflicts justify due skepticism and scrutiny. They do not justify unfair or unequal treatment. The proper way to respond is through the open science concept of *replication* to confirm, refute, or challenge the findings using the same publicly available datasets.

While we wish to register concern over the proposed retraction, we understand that we may not be acquainted with all the facts. We would be grateful, therefore, if you could provide further information on the following:

- The analysis that justifies a retraction and the rejection of the authors' sensitivity analysis.
- The process followed and its alignment with COPE retraction guidance.<sup>2</sup>
- The basis of a decision to retract rather than correct or clarify the paper.

We hope that further consideration of the retraction of this paper reaches a satisfactory conclusion with due regard for scientific integrity, open science, and publication ethics.

Please correspond with Professor Ray Niaura [Niaura@nyu.edu] as the point of contact. Thank you for your urgent consideration.

Yours sincerely

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<sup>2</sup> Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Retraction Guidelines, Version 2 November 2019. <https://bit.ly/3qcxEc5>

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