

# Lazy, stupid, wrong - the Mail can't stop itself

written by Clive Bates | 26 August 2013

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### E-cigarettes are as harmful as cigarettes and could cause cancer, claims study

- Findings from the National Consumers' Institute said it tested ten different rechargeable and disposable models for carcinogenic and toxic properties
- Researchers 'detected a significant quantity of carcinogenic molecules in the vapour of these cigarettes which have thus far gone undetected'
- Report also criticised certain models for lacking child-proof safety caps because nicotine levels contained could be lethal to children

By IAN SPARKS  
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Electronic cigarettes contain carcinogenic chemicals that make some as harmful as normal tobacco, a new French study has claimed.

Not content with one humiliating climbdown this year (see its [apology](#)), the Mail seems determined to press on for another with the [ludicrous article above](#) on 26 August. I complained to the Press Complaints Commission about the one in January (see full details [here](#)) and have just complained about this one. **Update 27 August:** an excellent analysis of this third rate study by Dr. Farsalinos: [A new "study" on chemical analysis of e-cigarette: nothing new but huge negative publicity and intimidation](#). **Update 30 August** - also see the [response by Jacques Le Houezec](#) and [comment by Jens Mellin](#).

As usual, the benign and measured fury of vapers was unleashed in the [comments](#) and every stupid assertion in the article challenged. The article refers a [study](#) (€) produced by a French consumer organisation, which it bravely and impartially [reported in its own house magazine](#) (getting a good hammering from *vapeurs* in the comments). Even so, much of the media appears to have treated it as though this was a serious scientific study. However, most news outlets managed to be strictly accurate but merely misleading - the general tone is 'e-cigs not so harmless, have carcinogens in them'. But not the Mail (or those [pathetically copying](#) the Mail): to them this showed e-cigarettes to be as bad as smoking, though nothing in the study or reporting says this. There are many flaws

in the Mail article, mostly shoddy health journalism and lack of balance or proportion, and life is too short to go into them all. So my complaint is below - with an additional comment to the PCC that I don't think it is right for the Mail just to be on the look out for gullible or crazy people ready to say the stupidest things about e-cigarettes and then report that as fact.

*I am complaining as this is a breach of the Editors' Code of Practice clause 1 on accuracy. It is particularly egregious as this follows an almost identical complaint ([130578](#)) against the same publication resolved in my favour through the PCC about an article published in January. See [here](#):*

*In this case the article headline and top paragraph misleads.*

*1. The French study that the article loosely cites does not find that "E-cigarettes are as harmful as cigarettes". The headline is "Pas si inoffensive, la cigarette électronique !" which translated 'means not so harmless' or similar - and this is not the same meaning as "as harmful as cigarettes".*

*2. The Mail Online article used uses no quotations from either the study or the magazine article that substantiate the headline.*

*3. The journalist has relied on a report in a French consumers' magazine of the original research rather than downloading it (it is behind a paywall) but neither the original study or the report have text or expert quotations that justifies the headline - that is why there are no quotes.*

*4. So the study doesn't back the headline or the leading paragraph, and none of those writing it or reporting on it in France say anything that would back it. It is particularly poor as this was the subject of a complaint earlier in the year, and one can only read this as deliberately and provocatively cavalier.*

*There are many other problems with the article, but most of that is just shabby journalism.*

*Further, I wish to make a broader point to the Mail about accuracy - none of this is necessary for the complaint, which based on 1-4 above, to be upheld.*

*If a study or a consumers magazine did somehow say 'e-cigarettes are as harmful as cigarettes' then it would be, strictly speaking, factually accurate to report that they had said this. However, that would be lending weight to a*

*factually inaccurate statement - and that could easily be established by talking to reputable experts. To do this would be misleading to the Mail's readers as it would be reporting this opinion as if it was science and without balance. In this case the study is not published in a peer reviewed journal, its provenance is unclear and the interpretation of its findings is very poor (I don't want to go into that for now). What one might hope or expect from a responsible national newspaper is a determination to uphold the spirit of the Editors' Code on accuracy not just look for ways to use the words of ill-informed commentators to try to get around it.*

*Clauses : Clause 1 - accuracy.*

The study is available in image form at [Avis cigarette électronique](#) - a French e-cig site.

**Update 30 August.** Now the Mail has changed the headline to *E-cigarettes contain chemicals that make some 'as harmful as normal tobacco'*. Amazingly, given they have obviously responded to criticism, this is just as lazy, stupid and wrong as the first one. I will notify the PCC that the complaint extends to this newly minted mendacity. You would think the Mail would look at the 300+ comments - most of which are sane, articulate and well argued, and realise their efforts to spin smears on e-cigs are self defeating.