Letter: WHO must urgently reassess its tobacco & nicotine policy and stop causing harm

written by Clive Bates | 31 May 2021

WHO should be building public trust, not giving its critics further justification

It's World No Tobacco Day and we have sent our detailed letter and multiple critical expert comments to the WHO Director-General. The covering note and links to relevant documents are reproduced below. I hope it causes them to pause and reflect. My guess is that Tedros has been very badly advised here.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General
World Health Organisation
Avenue Appia 20
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

31 May 2021

Dear Dr Adhanom Ghebreyesus

WHO must urgently reassess its tobacco & nicotine policy and stop causing harm

We write to express our grave concern about the direction the World Health Organisation is taking on tobacco and nicotine policy.

WHO's outright opposition to products that are, beyond any reasonable doubt, much lower risk than cigarettes (vaping, heated tobacco products, snus, oral nicotine etc) makes no sense in terms of science, public health or ethics.

WHO support for the prohibition of these low-risk products is wholly counter-productive and has the obviously perverse effect of protecting the cigarette trade, promoting smoking and increasing disease and death. How can WHO justify banning much safer alternatives to smoking while leaving cigarettes easily available everywhere? Yet, India's Health Minister has just received a WHO award for doing exactly this, with an endorsement by you personally. The main beneficiary will be India's dominant cigarette company, ITC Limited.

WHO's press release for World No Tobacco Day (31 May) is a perfect illustration of an international agency losing control of its scientific objectivity and its focus on reducing disease. We attach a detailed 14-page critique of this press release written by us, all longstanding independent public health policy experts with no conflicts of interest. We hope our critique prompts a complete rethink. This is a time when WHO should be building public trust, not giving its critics further justification.

We are not the only specialists concerned by WHO's bizarre stance, I attach a collection of statements from the independent expert community expressing deep concern about WHO's approach and in support of the use of harm reduction as a tobacco policy, including from highly respected former WHO directors.

These products need to be understood as part of a harm-reduction strategy and integral to meeting the Sustainable Development Goal target (3.4) to reduce cancer, respiratory cardiovascular and other non-communicable diseases. They are an opportunity, not a threat. It is time for WHO to catch up with the last 15 years of innovation and embrace tobacco harm reduction.

More discussion of these issues is available here: WHO has gone rogue on tobacco policy – millions at risk from tired dogma and a refusal to grasp innovation.

We hope you will reflect on this communication and provide a substantive response.

Yours sincerely

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