

Op-ed: Choosing innovation over inertia to achieve a smoke-free future

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Envision a time when smoking is obsolete—a not-so-distant future in which demand for cigarettes has withered away and smokers have either quit tobacco and nicotine completely or switched to a better alternative. This future is within reach, thanks to innovation, science, and investment.

At PMI, we've spent decades and billions of dollars developing our portfolio of science-based smoke-free alternatives to give those who do not quit a better choice. So far, that choice has empowered an estimated 22.1 million people to abandon cigarettes for our heat-not-burn alternatives.

But here's the kicker: The faster we innovate away from cigarettes, the more pushback we get. In some countries, innovation is being openly resisted. In others, banned outright. Public health commentators and anti-tobacco organizations make a habit of dismissing the potential of noncombustible alternatives and denying the effectiveness of smoke-free products in reducing smoking rates. Yet, the same groups refuse to engage fully with the latest science.

This discourse has led to inertia, misinformation, and confusion around the world, with many governments and regulators choosing to sit on the sidelines rather than consider a more inclusive strategy.

As PMI CEO Jacek Olczak mentioned recently, "Innovation needs to be accessible and impactful. It is imperative that countries worldwide adopt policy frameworks that keep pace with these innovations to deliver on the promise of progress."

For decades, governments have rightly waged war against smoking by many means. Yet it is estimated that over a billion people worldwide still smoke in 2025. It's evident that the current approach isn't working swiftly enough. We cannot afford more of the same. Better alternatives to cigarettes exist, and scientific data support their potential to be less harmful. The missing piece of this puzzle is the collective effort of governments, the public health community, our industry, and civil society to make these alternatives accessible to adult smokers who do not quit.

Clean energy and electric vehicles have proven that government regulations can foster, not obstruct, industry-led innovation that successfully addresses global challenges.

But it's crucial to understand that innovation in a vacuum, divorced from its enabling conditions, amounts to little. Innovation without application gets us nowhere. These are the circumstances that confront us today.

Nevertheless, we are committed to continued innovation and to offering better alternatives for adult smokers. We must harness the full potential of innovation paired with evidence-based policies if we want to drive meaningful solutions.

Some countries are already exemplifying the results of doing so: In Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S., we have seen a decline in smoking rates.

Meanwhile, in countries that ban or severely restrict smoke-free products, such as Australia, Singapore, Turkey, and others, smoking rates have been declining at a much slower pace, or worse—in some cases—increasing.

It's clear: in countries where innovation is embraced and allowed to reach consumers, positive change is happening. It's time to close the gap between these countries and the many others who are blocking progress.

Everyone has a role to play in closing the gap — governments, regulators, health institutions, the general public, the media — but they must be empowered with accurate information.

Skepticism and misinformation result in missed opportunities and stalled progress. On the other hand, accurate information and access to smoke-free products will accelerate progress.

We have the opportunity today to address the problem of smoking for 1 billion smokers worldwide. Let's not allow misinformation to get in the way of such an impactful possibility.