

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

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In a not-so-distant future, the world envisions a time when smoking becomes obsolete—where demand for cigarettes has withered away and smokers have either quit tobacco and nicotine completely or switched to a better alternative.

It's a future that's within reach, thanks to innovation, science, and investment. At PMI, we've spent decades and billions of dollars developing our portfolio of innovative and science-based smoke-free alternatives to give those who do not quit a better choice. For an estimated 22.1 million, that choice has meant abandoning 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—and banned outright in many others. Some public health commentators dismiss the potential of noncombustible alternatives without engaging fully with the science, while many anti-tobacco organizations choose to deny the effectiveness of smoke-free products in reducing smoking rates.

This discourse has led to inertia among many governments and regulators who choose to sit on the sidelines rather than consider a more inclusive and innovative strategy. But let's be clear: being idle is not a neutral position. As PMI CEO Jacek Olczak warned recently, inaction is a choice with real-world outcomes.

For decades, governments have rightly waged war against smoking by many means. Yet it is estimated that over a billion people worldwide will 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 the 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 shown that government regulations can foster, not obstruct, industry-led innovation in addressing global challenges. But it's crucial to understand that innovation in a vacuum, divorced from its enabling conditions, amounts to little. These are the circumstances that confront us today.

We are committed to innovation and to offering better alternatives to adult smokers. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that while our alternatives are integral, they alone will not achieve a smoke-free future.

We must harness the full potential of innovation and evidence-based policies that steer our collective efforts toward eliminating smoking. In countries that have embraced smoke-free products, such as 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, and worse—in some cases—have been increasing instead.

Based on WHO and other third-party data, our hypothetical model shows that if smoke-free products are assumed to be 80% less risky than cigarettes—and if people who currently smoke were to switch to them completely—then over their lifetime, there's a potential for a tenfold reduction in

smoking-attributable deaths compared with historical tobacco control measures alone. While this type of hypothetical estimate has limitations, it begins to show the cost of inaction.

It's time to prioritize science and innovation and embrace tobacco harm reduction by providing smokers that don't quit the access they need to better alternatives. The path to a smoke-free future cannot wait any longer.

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