

# FINANCIAL POST

Thursday, April 30, 2009

## Butt out, for once

Kevin Libin, FP Magazine

Presented by



Canada has been fighting Big Tobacco so long, perhaps it doesn't know how to do anything else - even if tobacco manufacturers may be on to something that could give smokers longer, healthier lives. Recently, Imperial Tobacco made Edmonton a test market for a cigarette-replacement product that dramatically reduces risks of heart disease and cancer. Were this product made by Pfizer or Johnson & Johnson, it might have earned endorsements from health officials. Consumers might have even heard about it, since drug firms are freer to advertise than tobacco makers. Instead, the experiment was a dud. Most smokers never learned of "snus," and that may be the end of an unusual, novel product in Canada.

In America, meantime, RJ Reynolds just launched a glitzy, national rollout of snus under its Camel cigarette brand. "Your cigarettes may get jealous," says the full-page ad in magazines like People, Rolling Stone and Sports Illustrated. Indeed, they might: Snus, a low-carcinogen tobacco contained in a pouch tucked under the lip, is vastly safer than smoking, independent research asserts. Over the past decade, it rapidly replaced cigarettes in Sweden, its birthplace, driving cancer and heart-disease rates to the lowest in Europe. University of Michigan's Tobacco Research Network director says of snus, "There is no compelling evidence that it has any adverse health consequences." Harvard's Tobacco Control Research Group last year said that switching every smoker to a smokeless product like snus would be a "public health miracle."

So why not here? For all our punitive tobacco taxes and bans, there remains a stubborn, significant rump of people - about one in five Canadians - who still smoke. They are why some epidemiologists study tobacco "harm reduction": If we can't make people quit the weed, they ask, can we at least make it safer? They've found smokeless tobacco, especially snus, offers an answer. Unfortunately, for those fixated on battling tobacco makers, it's one they don't want to hear.

One University of Alberta epidemiologist is the target of a campaign by anti-tobacco activists pushing to have him fired for studying snus harm reduction. The World Health Organization advises members to restrict smokeless tobacco with the same vigour as cigarettes, leading many European countries to ban snus trials. Canada, meanwhile, severely limits advertising or displays of smokeless tobacco. It could soon be illegal to sell snus altogether, since it typically comes in flavours like mint, whiskey, or apple: Politicians, including the prime minister, are vowing to ban flavoured tobacco, persuaded by anti-smoking groups that they're used like candy to lure children.

If we want to reduce tobacco-related morbidity, this is exactly the wrong approach. More smokers kick cigarettes with smokeless tobacco than with all the drugs and patches on the market, according to SmokeFree Pennsylvania, which believes health experts have an "ethical duty" to recommend safer, smokeless products like snus to nicotine addicts. Tobacco companies, having finally found a

growth product they can morally stand behind, are plowing millions into getting smokers to switch. (Besides RJ Reynolds, Philip Morris recently entered a joint snus venture with Swedish Match.) If they succeed, Americans may one day realize that elusive public health miracle. Canadian policy makers, on the other hand, keep blindly fighting Big Tobacco - an industry that may have a solution to the very health problem it helped create.

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