Tobacco companies' interests in smokeless tobacco products in Europe are driven by profit not health

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Transnational tobacco companies' investments in smokeless tobacco products, such as snus (a moist tobacco product that is placed under the upper lip), in Europe are not due to a concern for the health impacts of smoking but are instead driven purely by business interests according to new research by Silvy Peeters and Anna Gilmore from the University of Bath UK and the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies, published this week in *PLOS Medicine*.

To inform the policy debate surrounding snus, which is banned from sale in the European Union (EU) under legislation that is currently being reviewed in Brussels, the researchers analysed internal tobacco industry documents that have been made available by litigation alongside contemporary industry documentation to examine the historical interests of transnational tobacco companies. The analysis reveals tobacco companies' efforts to enter the EU market, and influence national and EU public health policy. The researchers also compare the industry's privately documented interests (observed via internal documents and investor presentations) with those harm reduction pursuits it has publicly espoused, and explore the implications for EU tobacco control policy.

Although the analysis was limited by the extent of the documents available to the researchers, the authors say, "[t]here is clear evidence that [British American Tobacco]'s early interest in introducing [smokeless tobacco] in Europe was based on the potential for creating an

alternative form of tobacco use in light of declining cigarette sales and social restrictions on smoking, with young people a key target."

The authors note, "[the study's findings] indicate that the industry's rhetoric on harm reduction has been inconsistent with historical and recent documents and business actions. Instead, the findings suggest that the [transnational tobacco companies'] interest in reduced-risk products lies in maintaining the status quo in favour of cigarettes for as long as possible while simultaneously providing a longer-term source of profit should the cigarette model prove unsustainable; the reputational benefits are an additional asset."

The authors conclude, "by investing in snus, and recently nicotine, [transnational tobacco companies] have eliminated competition between cigarettes and lower-risk products, thus helping maintain the current market balance in favour of (highly profitable) cigarettes while ensuring [transnational tobacco companies'] long-term future should cigarette sales decline further and profit margins be eroded."

More information: Peeters S, Gilmore AB (2013) Transnational Tobacco Company Interests in Smokeless Tobacco in Europe: Analysis of Internal Industry Documents and Contemporary Industry Materials. PLoS Med 10(9): e1001506. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1001506

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