

Can vapes save the world from smoking?

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Karl Erik Lund first puffed on a cigarette at a party not long after smoking rates peaked in Norway. In the mid 1970s, almost half of adults in the country smoked. Lund, who is now 60, was young and would never take to smoking in a big way. But in 1986, as a graduate in Oslo, he spotted an advert for a research role at the government agency that collated tobacco statistics. He needed the money, but he soon became addicted to the data. "I wanted to ask the question: why do people keep

going with a behavior that breaks society's rules?" he says.

Smokers in Norway, and in neighboring Sweden, were being targeted by one of the most advanced anti-smoking pushes in the world. In 1975, Norway banned all [tobacco advertising](#) and added health warnings to [cigarette packs](#). In the 1980s, ratcheting taxes made it one of the most expensive countries in which to buy cigarettes. Schoolchildren were encouraged to beg their parents to quit. Bans came into force on public transport and in offices. In one anti-smoking TV advert, Dracula sank his teeth into the throat of a young smoker only to cough and stagger back in a black cloud.

"The aim of Norwegian tobacco policy was to become a nicotine-free society," Lund tells me from his country house outside Oslo, where he is recovering from a dog-walking injury. Norway set out to educate, tax and scare people into quitting. But there was a problem: it wasn't working. Smoking rates had dropped only to about 38 percent by 1990.

Restrictions on indoor smoking culminated in a ban on smoking in any public space, including bars and restaurants, in 2004. The country was the second after Ireland to introduce such a ban. "Welcome to Norway. The only thing we smoke here is salmon," a health ministry poster said at the time.

But Norway is a cold country in which to smoke outside. By the time of the ban, smokers had already begun to find another way to get their nicotine hit: snus. Snus (it rhymes with "moose") is a type of oral snuff that has a long tradition in Scandinavia. Users place moist tobacco under the top lip, absorbing nicotine through the lining of the mouth rather than the lungs. In the 19th century, when smoking boomed elsewhere in the world, Norway and Sweden had favored snus. But from around the 1920s, cigarettes soared in popularity there too, and by the late 1960s, when snus use reached its lowest point, it had come to be seen as a

relic—something your grandfather did.

From the 1970s, though, manufacturers had fueled a snus renaissance, designing new packaging and adding new flavors. The loose tobacco the older generation had used had by then been packed into neat teabag-like pouches sold in colorful little tins.

Snus was becoming cleaner, more convenient—and cooler. In 1994, when Sweden held a referendum on joining the European Union, it demanded that Brussels exclude the country from an EU snus ban. As the 2004 smoking ban approached in Norway (which is not an EU member), Lund recalls, bar owners, worried about business, worked with snus manufacturers to install vending machines.

For a country that had set out to rid society of nicotine, the rise of snus was alarming. There were fears that the power of marketing and a new cachet would draw young non-smokers into addiction, undoing decades of steady if slow progress. Snus users were warned that their habit could give them mouth and pancreatic cancer.

But Lund saw something different. As snus use tripled in the decade after the indoor smoking ban, smoking rates entered a steeper decline. In 2017, snus use overtook smoking in Norway. Norway and Sweden now have among the lowest smoking rates in Europe—just 12 percent among adults in Norway and only 10 percent in Sweden, compared to an EU average of 28 percent. Rates of lung cancer in Sweden are among the lowest anywhere.

An often fierce debate about snus in Norway would foreshadow a wider argument after the emergence of another alternative for smokers: the e-cigarette. It would pit many scientists, including Lund, against public health orthodoxy. At the heart of it were seemingly simple questions. Could an alternative nicotine product, sold on the free market, save

millions of lives and stub out cigarettes for good? Were smokers finding their own solution to a deadly problem in the very drug the world had come to fear?

Lund is in no doubt about the potential of non-combustible tobacco. Last November, he traveled from Oslo to the Royal Society in London for the sixth annual U.K. E-Cigarette Summit. At the end of a presentation about Sweden's and Norway's relationships with nicotine, he told delegates: "It is difficult for us in tobacco control to realize and accept that snus and e-cigarettes may have greater potential to make smoking obsolete than the regulations we have spent a lifetime fighting for."

Deborah Arnott remembers going to a casino near Leicester Square in London for the launch of an unusual new device. It was February 2008, less than a year after England had introduced its indoor smoking ban. Arnott has been chief executive of the Action on Smoking and Health charity (ASH) since 2003 and is a leading figure in the UK's tobacco control movement. "Conference Presents Scientific Breakthrough for Much Safer Smoking," the invitation read. The event was run by a company called SuperSmoker, whose director, the Belgium-based entrepreneur Dimitri Kyriakopoulos, sat alongside doctors and what Arnott remembers as a minor celebrity (it was the chef Antony Worrall Thompson, who was then a heavy smoker).

The SuperSmoker device looked like a long cigarette with an orange mouthpiece, a white shaft, and even a "burning" tip. But the tip was an LED light that glowed with each puff, or blinked when the battery ran low. Inside, cartridges contained nicotine in a liquid that turned to vapour when the user activated an element while inhaling. Food additives mimicked the taste of tobacco. The device cost £79 and cartridges were £7.95 for six. Arnott was underwhelmed.

The SuperSmoker was one of the first e-cigarettes to hit the U.K.

market. But, like Arnott, smokers were initially skeptical. When journalist Terri Judd puffed on a SuperSmoker in a London pub soon after the launch event in 2008, drinkers were "stunned at what in one short year has become a shocking sight," she wrote in the Independent. "One man grabs his mobile phone to take a picture."

Judd, who remembered smoking in a bar with a friend on the eve of the U.K. ban, like "mourners at a wake, savoring our memories of better days," concluded that it would be a while before e-cigarettes brought "skeptical, rebellious smokers" in from the cold.

A decade after the SuperSmoker launch, in April last year, a giant cloud was building over an exhibition space at the ExCel centre in east London. Below it, more than 100 businesses were showing their wares in an explosion of music and strobe lighting. Charlie Rabone, a 20-year-old from Stockport, was blowing vapor rings at the stand belonging to an American producer of vape liquids. ("Juice," as enthusiasts call the liquid, is a blend of the additives vegetable glycerin and propylene glycol, as well as nicotine and flavorings.) An Italian company was selling £300 cases for e-cigarettes, hand-carved in spalted beech wood.

This was Vape Jam UK, now in its fourth year. After a lukewarm reception, the e-cigarette had evolved dramatically and spread fast. What had been conceived as a utilitarian device, which looked and behaved like a cigarette, had become something very different. A cottage industry of small businesses had fueled a global market now worth an estimated \$12 billion. Vape Jam felt like equal parts tech convention, food fair and rock festival.

Very quickly, manufacturers moved away from what are known as "cigalike" devices to create a dizzying range of choices. The slimmest e-cigarettes now resemble pens or sleek memory sticks, while chunkier units, known as "mods," have interchangeable parts and create billowing

clouds. There are more choices of flavor than there are colors on the Pantone chart. For a lot of the enthusiasts at Vape Jam, vaping had become a lifestyle and culture. But the products on show there filter down to the petrol-station counters and vape shops mushrooming on high streets across Britain.

ASH did not start [monitoring e-cigarette use](#) until 2012, by which time 700,000 people in the U.K. already reported vaping. That number had almost doubled by 2013 and last year reached 3.2 million. Unlike snus in Scandinavia, the e-cigarette was a new product. But, Lund says, "They are both grassroots and consumer-driven, and have occurred without the support of the authorities." And vaping worried some guardians of public health in the same way that snus did. Here, they thought, was a rogue product of the free market that would enable addiction and appeal to young people, potentially acting as a new gateway to cigarettes.

In contrast, the giant tobacco companies soon began investing in this rising threat to their business models, marching into a market that had been conceived to undo a health catastrophe of their making. Until then, Lund says, the tobacco industry had been seen as "the good enemy we can all agree to hate." There were traditionally three aims in tobacco control, Arnott explains. "And they all used to align quite nicely. One was to get rid of harm caused by smoking. Two was stopping addiction. Three was destroying the tobacco industry."

The EU did not move against e-cigarettes in the way it had against snus, which it banned in 1992. But the EU Tobacco Products Directive, implemented in 2016, outlawed broadcast advertising and brought in new standards for liquids and devices. It required new [health warnings](#) about nicotine addiction on labeling and called for more to be done to deter teenage vapers. Britain had already banned sales to under-18s in 2015. Other countries, including Australia and Canada, have taken a much harder line. E-cigarettes are banned entirely in several, including

Argentina, Brazil, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates.

There were warnings again about the unknown long-term health risks of inhaling vapour, and a growing public perception that vaping wasn't much safer than smoking. In the US, between 2012 and 2017, [two regular surveys](#) found big increases in the proportion of people thinking that e-cigarettes were as harmful as cigarettes or even worse. In Britain, vaping indoors is legal but businesses have broadly forbidden it, forcing vapers to share pavements with smokers.

But senior public health officials take a different view. In 2015, [a report from Public Health England](#) estimated that vaping was 95 percent less harmful than smoking. In 2014, David Nutt, a professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College London, and a former drugs adviser to the U.K. government, described e-cigarettes as "[the greatest health advance since vaccines](#)". A year earlier, Professor John Britton, chair of the Tobacco Advisory Group at the Royal College of Physicians, [said](#) that millions of premature deaths in Britain would be prevented if smokers switched to e-cigarettes, describing this prospect as "a massive potential public health prize."

Ian Blandamer started smoking when he was about 14. "All my mates were doing it and I didn't want to be left out," he says. Blandamer, who is now 54, grew up in Leicester and remembers his father smoking up to 80 cigarettes a day. Aged 16, Blandamer would spend his pound a day of lunch money on fags and chips, eventually working his way up to a 40-a-day smoking habit that lasted for 37 years.

When Blandamer hit 50, he started to exercise more. His GP told him he also ought to quit smoking. "The kicker was asking my mother what she wanted for her 80th birthday and her telling me she wanted me to quit the fags," he recalls. "When I told her recently about the dinner money she nearly killed me."

Blandamer had a coworker who knew about quitting, so they met for a drink. Mark Dickinson had worked for GlaxoSmithKline, the pharmaceutical giant. In 1998, he had led the European launch of NiQuitin, a range of nicotine patches and gums. It was November 2016 and Dickinson had just launched his own health consultancy. He was beginning to work with companies in the vaping industry. After a drink near Dickinson's home in south-west London, he took Blandamer to a vape shop. Blandamer tried a Chinese-made Innokin T18 device and added some fruit-juice-flavored liquid.

"I thought, 'This is bloody brilliant,'" Blandamer says. He and Dickinson, who is not a smoker, went on to a coffee shop and sat outside, vaping some more. Blandamer quit that day and hasn't lit up since. "I had about 15 cigarettes left in a packet and put them in my shed," he says.

Until the e-cigarette arrived, smokers had less choice. Soon after landmark studies and reports in the 1950s and 1960s confirmed the link to cancer and compelled governments to act, tobacco companies tried and failed to create less deadly cigarettes, an attempt that would further erode trust in them.

Sweden provided an alternative. In 1967, Claes Lundgren, a military doctor, had noticed that submariners, who were banned from smoking because of fire risks, were using traditional alternatives such as snus. Wondering if there might be a better solution, he wrote to his friend Ove Fernö at AB Leo, a Swedish pharmaceutical company. Fernö began experimenting with nicotine in chewing gum. [By 1978](#), he was ready to launch his gum. Lundgren had already suggested a name, based on the words "nicotine" and the Norwegian word for "right"—"rette."

Nicorette triggered a new phase in tobacco control. Pharmaceutical companies developed medicinal remedies that would be prescribed or sold over the counter as part of what became known as nicotine

replacement therapy. Nicotine patches were patented in the U.S. in 1986 and arrived in the U.K. in 1992, adding to a medicine cabinet that has also included lozenges, inhalers and nasal sprays. The prescription drugs Zyban and Champix came later, designed to reduce nicotine cravings.

Medical solutions rely on smokers to recognize their addiction as a medical issue. Blandamer never did. He also enjoyed smoking as a relaxing and often social activity. Patches offered him nothing beyond nicotine. As well as a chemical addiction, the hand-to-mouth habit itself can be powerful. "That's one of the clever ways nicotine works," says Robert West, professor of health psychology and director of tobacco studies at University College London. "It pharmacologically binds your actions to situations and generates the impulse to do what you're doing."

West says this may partly explain why vaping appears to work for many smokers. But it's not that simple. Studies that pre-date e-cigarettes, in which smokers were given either patches or a pharmaceutical nicotine inhaler, showed no increased effect in the inhaler group, despite its mimicry of smoking motions.

Yet contemporary research shows vaping is more effective as a quitting aid. [One study](#), carried out by Peter Hajek, director of the Wolfson Institute of *Preventive Medicine's* Tobacco Dependence Research Unit at Queen Mary University of London, found that e-cigarettes were almost twice as effective as nicotine replacement products such as patches. A year after the start of the study, which was published earlier this year in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 18 percent of the e-cigarette group had quit smoking, compared to 10 percent of the nicotine replacement group.

[Another study](#) compared the quitting power of various aids. Smokers who were prescribed patches, lozenges or gum, alongside motivational support, were 34 percent more likely to quit successfully than those who

tried with no aids. Those who bought patches or gums off the shelf were no more likely to quit. Those who were prescribed Champix were 82 percent more likely to stop. Smokers in the e-cigarette group were about 95 percent more likely to quit. Jamie Brown, who led the research team, said: "It is important that e-cigarettes appeared to be equally effective for smokers of all ages and social backgrounds."

More than satisfying any impulses or habits, West puts the e-cigarette's relative success down to a simple factor: the efficiency with which it gets nicotine into the body. "I think there is probably a tipping point in the speed of nicotine delivery which takes a product from something that only prevents withdrawal symptoms to something that gives you positive reinforcement and keeps you doing it," he says. This effect plays out in Hajek's recent study. Among the smokers who had quit, 80 percent of the e-cigarette group were still vaping after a year, while only 9 percent of the nicotine replacement group's quitters were still using their products.

The efficiency of vaping also leads many ex-smokers to reduce the levels of nicotine in their liquids. [ASH's latest surveys](#), carried out by YouGov, show that 43 percent of vapers have lowered the strength of nicotine they use over time. At Vape Jam I met a handful of vapers who had dropped all the way to zero nicotine. They had started in order to quit smoking and then cut back on nicotine as their cravings dulled. But they still liked to vape.

In 2015, a Californian startup called Juul Labs launched a new e-cigarette. Small and sleek, it looked like a USB flash drive, and soon developed a following among teenagers despite age limits on sales. Reports spread last year of an epidemic of "Juuling" in high schools. The company, which promoted its brand on social media, was accused of targeting a new generation of non-smokers for whom vaping might act as a gateway to cigarettes.

Parents also feared Juul's high nicotine content, which was approximately three times the EU limit, as permitted in the US, and the potential long-term health risks of the chemicals that make up e-liquids. Vaping may be better for their children than smoking, parents argued, but there was still uncertainty about its health effects—and what's more, Juuling was harder to detect. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) launched a series of investigations. Two surveys, published by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in 2019 and by researchers at University of Michigan's [Institute for Social Research](#) in 2018, showed a spike in high-school students who reported having vaped in the previous 30 days. The Michigan survey suggested more than a quarter of high-schoolers were vaping.

The response was swift. U.S. states have lined up this year to raise the minimum age for buying e-cigarettes and tobacco products from 18 to 21, and there are calls for a federal limit. The FDA ordered manufacturers to limit the range of flavors they sold and do more to prevent underage sales.

The city of San Francisco, home to Juul Labs, has announced a ban on the sale of e-cigarettes from next year "until due diligence is carried out by the FDA concerning Big Tobacco companies like Juul marketing to our youth." Juul says it fears the move will drive smokers who have successfully switched to vaping back to cigarettes. "We have already taken the most aggressive actions in the industry to keep our products out of the hands of those underage and are taking steps to do more," says the company's spokesman, Ted Kwong.

More widely, reports in the press have warned that e-cigarettes can cause "popcorn lung," a condition that can require a transplant. (It was first observed among workers in a popcorn factory who had been exposed to very high levels of a flavoring called diacetyl, also used, in small doses, in some flavors of e-liquids.) There have been no recorded cases of

popcorn lung in e-cigarette users, and diacetyl is no longer permitted in e-juice sold in the EU (and is not an ingredient in Juul). Studies have also warned against the presence in vapour clouds of formaldehyde, a potential carcinogen, which has fueled fears of passive vaping.

But compared with smoking tobacco, U.K. health bodies say, there's no contest. Still, they have faced heavy criticism of their support for e-cigarettes as effective quitting aids. When [Public Health England](#) estimated in 2015 that vaping was 95 percent less harmful than smoking, it triggered an eruption. Editorials in [The Lancet](#) and [BMJ](#) said the evidence of the long-term effects of vaping did not go back far enough and was not concrete enough to support such a bold statement. In 2016, the World Health Organization called for tighter regulation of e-cigarettes in the absence of stronger evidence of their safety and potential as quitting aids. An editorial this year in the journal *Nature* pointed to an "evidence gap" regarding the safety of e-cigarettes and their effectiveness as a smoking cessation aid. Until more is known, it said, "it seems premature to advocate strongly for e-cigarette use, and imperative that regulators develop guidelines to limit vaping by adolescents."

"England is a complete outlier when you look at the international scene," says Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. McKee is the most prominent vape-skeptic among U.K. academics (more than one of whom has described McKee to me as "isolated," an idea he forcefully rejects). McKee, too, points at the lack of long-term safety studies. Vaping is safer than smoking, he accepts, but this does not justify its promotion until we know more. He calls the 95 percent figure "untenable" and says his own position has earned him abuse and even death threats.

Martin Dockrell, the Tobacco Control Programme lead at Public Health England (formerly director of research and policy at ASH), stands by the

"95 percent" report and was surprised by the reaction to it. He agrees that more research is needed to determine the long-term effects of vaping. His bigger concern was the effects that media stories about possible dangers of vaping have on smokers who might like to quit. "Year on year we saw the number of people who believed vaping was at least as harmful as smoking was increasing," he says. "Why would they switch? We wanted to redress the balance."

ASH's [latest survey](#), in 2018, found that only 17 percent of the British public said vaping was a lot less harmful than smoking. Around a third of smokers (37 percent) had never tried vaping. The most common reason they gave was a reluctance to substitute one addiction for another (18 percent). The next biggest reasons (each reported by 11 percent of smokers) included a lack of information and concerns about safety.

Dockrell says reporting of some academic studies into "passive vaping" was [misleading](#), and that levels of potentially harmful chemicals in e-cigarette vapour were too low to cause anything like the horrors of tar and carbon monoxide, the most harmful ingredients of tobacco smoke. Nicotine itself, while highly addictive, is not classified as a carcinogen (see [What do we really know about vaping?](#)). Peter Hajek and others have even contended it is roughly as risky as caffeine.

Hajek is critical of the U.S. response to vaping. He says the surveys that measure vaping during the preceding 30 days risk categorizing casual experimentation among teens as longer-term use. He questions the idea that young vapers become young smokers. "If anything it's the opposite," he says. "The decline in young people smoking has accelerated when alternative products come out. In Norway there are virtually no smokers among young people." In Britain last year, 1.7 percent of people aged [11 to 18 reported vaping every week](#). Just 0.2 percent of the same age group reported vaping weekly while never having smoked. Among longer-term vapers of any age who have never smoked, meanwhile, it is hard to say

how many would have become smokers instead.

Ian Blandamer was so struck by his own switch to vaping that in January last year, 20 years after Dickinson had helped launch NiQuitin, the pair opened a vape shop together in south London. Blandamer can't understand the hostile response to the e-cigarette, and resents the way that tightening rules on vaping make him feel like his former smoking self.

Snus has not remained a Scandinavian oddity. Its use has also grown steadily in the US, where Swedish Match, the biggest manufacturer of snus in Sweden and Norway, competes with the U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company (USSTC), a subsidiary of Altria, the parent company of Philip Morris U.S. (and Marlboro). In the early 1980s, USSTC built a snus factory in Scotland to make Skoal Bandits, one of its brands. But, 30 years before the vaping scare, concerns about safety soon followed. The Mirror called the tobacco pouches "[cancer sweets](#)" in a 1985 report.

Kenneth Clarke, then the UK's health secretary (and later deputy chairman and a director of British American Tobacco), introduced a [ban on snus in 1990](#). The EU followed suit in 1992, before allowing Sweden's exemption. A strikingly similar debate about the safety of snus—and its potential appeal to non-smokers—still rages in Norway. Last year the government there introduced plain packaging for snus. In the US, warning labels on cans of Swedish snus say that "this product can cause mouth cancer" and warns that it is "not a safe alternative to cigarettes." In fact, evidence shows [little or no increase in mouth cancers in snus users](#) in Europe—though a review of studies in *The Lancet* did find an elevated risk of pancreatic and esophageal cancers.

Swedish Match says such warnings are misplaced, and [rebuts studies that have linked snus to cancers](#). Independent proponents of snus as a quitting aid, including Karl Lund, point to the [radically reduced dangers of snus](#)

[when compared to cigarettes](#). Yet regulation of—and attitudes to—nicotine alternatives vary wildly between countries. Australia and Canada are also tough on e-cigarettes, which are notably banned or restricted in some tobacco-producing countries. In Australia, where e-cigarettes containing nicotine are illegal (cigarettes containing nicotine are not, but are [taxed more](#) than in any other country), [the government says](#) the WHO's 2016 report justifies a cautious approach.

Australia's policy also specifically points to the need to protect public health policy from the interests of the tobacco industry—Lund's "good enemy." The American blu eCigs brand was bought up by a tobacco company in 2012 and is now part of Imperial Brands, which sells e-cigarettes through its Fontem Ventures company. British American Tobacco launched its Vype e-cigarettes in 2013, while Altria last year bought a 35 percent stake in Juul. In 2013, Imperial acquired the e-cigarette brand founded by Hon Lik, the Chinese pharmacist credited with inventing the modern device. The loudest, best-funded lobbying against Australia's vaping laws is coming not from public health advocates but from Big Tobacco.

Even if supporting the tobacco industry's entry into e-cigarettes is tantamount to vaping with the devil, are governments that restrict or prohibit snus or vaping—for this or for safety reasons—ultimately risking lives? Hajek says that such bans "clearly protect the cigarette trade and harm smokers." Robert West points out that countries with tighter vaping restrictions tend to be behind the curve in tobacco control. The exception is Australia, he adds: "But if their regulation was similar to that in the U.K. I would predict that they would see smoking prevalence going down a little faster."

By the same argument, there are calls in Britain for better access to e-cigarettes. After decades of regulation, innovation and debate, smoking rates dropped to [15 percent of adults in 2017](#), or 7.4 million smokers.

This was down from 20 percent five years earlier. But smoking still kills nearly 100,000 in the U.K. each year. A report by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee last year [recommended](#) that GPs should be able to prescribe e-cigarettes as well as nicotine replacement products. Proponents of harm reduction, including ASH, argue this would particularly benefit lower-income communities, where smoking rates remain higher.

Vaping has not only challenged the movement against Big Tobacco, but also frustrated attempts to wean the world off nicotine. Even when pharmaceutical products were the go-to alternative for smokers who wanted to quit, nicotine was still "demonized," West says. "The idea that you would give it to people to come off cigarettes was appalling. It took a long time for people to come round to the idea it might be beneficial, and even then it was something you would use for a short period as a sort of buffer between smoking and becoming nicotine-free."

Then came e-cigarettes, which people appeared to use for longer periods—during a transition away from smoking—and for months or even years thereafter. Of the 3.2 million people who were vapers in Britain last year, 52 percent were ex-smokers but 44 percent were still smoking to some degree. These dual users are a new target for research. While switching is the goal—and the proportion of dual users among vapers is in steady decline—any reduction in smoking is a good thing, Hajek argues. "Dual use has been demonstrated to generate reductions in toxin intake," he says. Dual users are also more likely to try new devices once they become available, increasing the chances of quitting cigarettes altogether.

Hajek says critics pounced on the 80 percent figure in his latest study—the proportion of vapers still doing so after a year (with or without nicotine). "They said it showed that e-cigarettes don't help people overcome nicotine addiction—never mind that they aren't now

dying from lung disease," he recalls. Hajek is frustrated by the "moralistic" attitude to nicotine. "It got somehow into this 'war on drugs' frame of mind, that you have to eradicate it and if people are dying from it, that's a warning to others," he says. "Better to keep smokers smoking and dying than to allow them to have their fun without the risk."

Karl Lund has been accused of betraying his peers and shilling for Big Tobacco because of his stance on snus. Swedish Match has used the courts to challenge bans and restrictions. Last year it [unsuccessfully](#) took on the EU ban in the European Court of Justice. In 2017, the company, which stopped selling cigarettes in 1999 to focus on snus, sued the Norwegian government over its new plain packaging laws. The company called Lund as an expert witness, pitting him against some of his own colleagues, who were giving evidence in support of the government.

"This really caused problems in my department," Lund says. "But when you're called to court in Norway you have to go. So I was thinking what I should say. I could of course have bluffed away and said nothing, but I decided that if I was called as an expert, I would again be loyal to my data." Lund understood fears that young people might be drawn to attractive packaging and branding, but predicted the net effect of the plain packaging law would be to deter people from switching from cigarettes to snus, while adding to a perception that all nicotine products are roughly as dangerous as each other. (According to his research in Norway, [snus is perceived by the public to be almost 80 percent as harmful as cigarettes](#).) As he feared, the court appearance triggered a new wave of criticism. "The Ministry of Health didn't like this logic at all," Lund recalls. "So again they thought I was disloyal to the policy. It was a really tough period."

Yet Lund remains convinced that snus and e-cigarettes can help eradicate smoking entirely. According to what is known as the hardening hypothesis, traditional methods for helping people stop smoking will

now produce marginal gains because the smokers most receptive to them have already quit. For those who won't or can't, "facilitating" the use of snus or e-cigarettes is a good strategy, Lund says. His research has suggested snus attracts smokers who don't want to use patches, as well as those who had not contemplated quitting at all. "I really see no future for combustible cigarettes," he says. West predicts smoking rates could drop to as low as 5 percent in Britain "if we keep implementing policies that we know are effective."

Lund is already looking beyond what he calls the "final stage" of the smoking epidemic in high-income countries—an endgame that he believes will also be hastened by generational shifts. In Norway, just 1 percent of women and 5 percent of men aged 16–24 now start smoking. But he does not predict an end to nicotine itself. "What I think is a more interesting question is whether society will allow snus and [e-cigarettes](#) in a future situation where these products have made smoking obsolete," he says. When there is no smoking to control, alternatives will have lost their function. "So I think the heated debate on tobacco harm reduction of today, eventually will be replaced by an even more intense debate over the recreational use of nicotine."

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