

SELECT COMMITTEE ON TOBACCO HARM REDUCTION

Professor Emily Banks
Responses to Questions on Notice from
Hearing on Friday, 13 November 2020

QoN 016-01, Senator Griff. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements, made by Adjunct Professor John Skerritt of the Therapeutic Goods Administration, during the inquiry's public hearing on 13 November 2020. Please state the reasons for your position.

a. *"I believe that smoking is more harmful than vaping but that does not make vaping harmless - in the same way that being hit by a car on the freeway is less harmful than being hit by a truck but it is not desirable."*

b. *"In the same way that we didn't know in 1960 about the long-term effects of cigarettes, because vaping, especially at a significant level, is still a relatively recent phenomenon, the evidence is still fairly scant. However, there are a number of studies published in the medical literature...that have shown detrimental effects from vaping of nicotine cigarettes and also detrimental effects even when the e-cigarettes do not have nicotine, because many of the substances in e-cigarettes were never really intended to be heated up and put into the lungs."*

Response

As noted in my opening statement, my team is in the process of reviewing the evidence on the health impacts of e-cigarettes, so I am unable to comment on the health impacts of e-cigarettes relative to tobacco smoking.

I can however comment on the general principle that underpins Adjunct Professor Skerritt's first comment: the choice of reference group when considering the health effects of an exposure.

Smoking is Australia's deadliest habit and death rates among smokers in Australia are three times those of people who have never smoked, over a given time period.¹ The choice of smoking as a reference group therefore sets a low bar and, as Professor Skerritt notes, something that is less harmful than smoking is not necessarily "harmless".

For people who are non-smokers or never-smokers, the most appropriate reference group for evaluating the health effects of e-cigarettes is non-smokers or never-smokers who have not been exposed to e-cigarettes.

Reference

1. Banks E, Joshy G, Weber M, Liu B, Grenfell R, Egger S, Paige E, Lopez A, Sitas F, Beral V. Tobacco smoking and all-cause mortality in a large Australian cohort study: findings from a mature epidemic with current low smoking prevalence. *BMC Medicine* 2015;13:38.