

The Tobacco Endgame: A Never-Ending Story?

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The report of the INSPIRED project aimed at providing insights into tobacco endgame goals deserved comment.¹

First, the selection of six countries (Canada, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and Sweden) is arbitrary. What about national plans that have flourished like fleeting flowers. For example, (1) in 2010, Bhutan imposed the world's strictest law, a complete tobacco ban, but recently reversed it; (2) Russia, in 2017, was the first country to announce a generational ban but nothing happened.² We are afraid that promises only bind those who believe in them.

Second, tobacco policy is one public policy among many. On the form, political inaction or poor action usually prevails when it comes to implementation, regardless of promises. On the substance, none of the plans deserved the term “strategy” as balanced scorecard principles are ignored: no strategic management performance metrics to identify and improve the operations for achieving the outcomes.

Second, why is it so difficult to acknowledge a gross failure? Certainly, the definition of the endgame can vary¹ but we must confess that the core is a “tobacco-free generation.” However, no country has reduced nicotine content yet. Why is this key measure³ not yet among those recommended by the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control? On the contrary, many countries have allowed the marketing of new nicotine products by the tobacco industry, a bonanza allowing valuable investments.⁴ Robert West dared to blow the whistle: “The tobacco industry is not on the run ... Globally its revenues continue to rise.”⁵ The consequences of the marketing of new nicotine products can hardly be a surprise. In Australia, a beacon for tobacco control, smoking prevalence in the general population has stopped decreasing and, for the first time since the early-to-mid-1990s, there is an increase in teen smoking.⁶ In England, although smoking rates in young people have been decreasing, more than 10% of 16–17-year-olds smoke, and smoking rates in teenagers have actually increased in some countries since 2020.⁷ At the population level, vaping is not an effective tool for getting rid of smoking. Electronic nicotine delivery systems end expectations for a tobacco endgame.

Last, Australia, with a daily smoking prevalence of 10.2% among people aged 15 years and over, illustrates the ambiguity of tobacco control. Total federal revenue from tobacco products (\$million, current dollars) rose from 5.0 in 2001 to 12.6 in 2023 with an expectation of 14.7 in 2027 (Table

13.6.5 in Greenhalgh et al.⁸) Globally, no budget department has plans to afford a tobacco endgame.⁹ What's the true meaning of “control” in tobacco control? It seems it could be as in the “control” in “air traffic control.”

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