

The 'tobacco endgame' in an age of disinformation: rising to the challenge

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As 2025 begins, marking the 20th anniversary year of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) entering into force, it is timely to reflect on how much the tobacco control landscape has changed. Advances that were unimaginable to many at the time the FCTC was being negotiated have been made, yet progress remains both uneven and precarious, subject to government changes and the ideology shifts that accompany them.

This issue of *Tobacco Control* also coincides with the inauguration of a second Trump presidency in the USA. Taking place at a time of global instability and rapid change, speculating how this might unfold and what it means for tobacco control policy is a fool's game. The election was characterised by deliberately exploited disinformation and conspiracy theories, including about public health. With one of Trump's most vocal supporters Elon Musk controlling a major source of information, and now in a position to exert ongoing influence, the election showed that 'if you control enough of the information ecosystem, truth no longer matters', presenting challenges for how to regulate social media and hold the rich and powerful to account when they interfere with national and international politics.¹ The field of tobacco control is well acquainted with and experienced in countering policy interference. Still, the challenges have become greater—for both civil society and politicians committed to evidence-based public health policies.

The USA is not a party to the FCTC, but it has a strong normative influence on public health and tobacco control globally.² Trump's appointment of Robert F Kennedy Jr as Secretary of Health and Human Services has raised serious concerns in the global health community, not only due to his predilection for conspiracy theories and antiscience views,³ but also the potential threats it represents to agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health,² including research

funding.⁴ Some of Kennedy's rhetoric should theoretically be heartening to those concerned with non-communicable diseases including the mantra of 'Make America Healthy Again', and his stated desire to tackle chronic diseases; improve the quality of food, especially for children; and address the revolving door between government and industry.⁵ Yet despite tobacco being the leading cause of preventable morbidity and mortality, it is curiously absent from his rhetoric about concern for tackling commercially driven diseases. He would do well to remember the commercial drivers of disease are interrelated, including the role of the tobacco industry in the food system.⁶ Similarly, concerns about the 'revolving door' between the FDA and the industries it regulates is welcome if it leads to genuine reform of a perennial issue, both in the USA and elsewhere—and extends to the revolving door with the tobacco industry. It is noteworthy that Trump's chief of staff is a former tobacco lobbyist.⁷

Among these challenges, there are reasons for both optimism as well as continued vigilance and the need for tobacco control to stay on the front foot. In 2024, more than a decade after it first was offered as a policy approach,⁸ the Tobacco-Free Generation (TFG) and its various iterations seemed to be an idea whose time has come. At the time of writing, its passage into law in Britain looks promising, making it likely to be the first national jurisdiction to implement the policy.⁹ Britain will, of course, take the honour of being the first from Aotearoa New Zealand, which came tantalisingly close to implementing a Smoke-Free Generation policy, together with reducing nicotine in cigarettes to non-addictive levels and a retailer reduction policy, before a new government abruptly repealed all three policies.¹⁰ The New Zealand government's justification for the repeal closely aligned with tobacco industry narratives, raising concerns about historical connections between some government members and the tobacco industry, prompting reminders to the new government of its obligations under FCTC Article 5.3.¹¹

TFG policies are also finding momentum at the local level. In the US

state of Massachusetts, several towns have enacted Nicotine-Free Generation policies, covering all commercial tobacco and non-therapeutic nicotine products, including e-cigarettes. Legislation to expand the policy to the entire state will be considered early in 2025.¹² A TFG policy is also being considered in the Australian state of South Australia.¹³ Since 2014, numerous jurisdictions have considered or attempted to introduce TFG policies, including Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Denmark. The momentum occurring with TFG policies is likely to support further denormalisation of tobacco and the tobacco industry and helps to shift policy paradigms from 'control' to 'elimination'. However, as others have pointed out there are potential pitfalls for the TFG policy approach, and it should be pursued as one of a package of measures rather than a standalone endgame policy.¹⁴

Against these challenges, and as the many demand-based measures in the FCTC are making inroads, FCTC Article 2.1 is receiving fresh attention. The 11th FCTC Conference of the Parties (COP11) will be held in November, marking a return to normality after the delayed COP10 was held in Panama in February 2024, the first in-person meeting since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At COP10, a decision was adopted to form an expert group on 'forward-looking tobacco control measures' in relation to article 2.1.¹⁵ Long overlooked in tobacco control policy,¹⁶ FCTC Article 2.1 reflects the resilience of the Treaty to changing circumstances, and the foresight of those involved in drafting it to include a provision that ensures measures contained in the Treaty are a floor, not a ceiling, and that measures should evolve as circumstances change. The Article 2.1 report to COP11 will provide a platform for FCTC Parties to build on the growing effectiveness of the Treaty in its first two decades.

The impact of the push to move tobacco control towards ending the tobacco epidemic can be seen in the December 2024 editorial for the trade publication *Tobacco Reporter*. Established 150 years ago, the editorial announced that the publication would cease operations at the end of 2024. It noted that in recent years, considerable space has been devoted to the tobacco endgame. The editorial stated: 'The decision to cease publication is indirectly related to the tobacco endgame initiatives, which have created an increasingly challenging business environment for the companies we rely on to support our operations. After

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assessing the outlook for the global tobacco and nicotine sectors, our parent organization, TMA, decided that it no longer wanted to invest in its trade magazines. Our sister publication, Vapor Voice, will also cease operations at the end of this month'.¹⁷ The magazine will become an online news service and it also announced that TMA (Tobacco Manufacturers Association) is soon to become the Nicotine Resource Consortium. The industry events at the American and Global Tobacco and Nicotine Forums will also continue, requiring ongoing monitoring from the public health community.

While it is a small step, the demise of both publications is a reminder that change can be both overdue, as well as sudden and unexpected. No government or president is forever. The tobacco industry has survived (and thrived) far longer than should have been permitted by governments, at the tragic cost of millions of lives cut short and blighted by avoidable suffering. The era of the tobacco endgame is dawning—it is up to the public health community to ensure progress continues.

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