

# Nicotine addiction as a moral problem: barriers to e-cigarette use for smoking cessation in two working-class areas in Northern England

Dr Frances Thirlway SSA Conference 2019, Newcastle











#### About me

- University of York Research Fellow in the Sociology Department, funded by Cancer Research UK 2017/21
- researching smoking cessation and health inequalities (PhD 2015)
- long-term relationship with high smoking prevalence deprived areas of North East (County Durham) and North West (North Manchester)
- no industry funding (tobacco, e-cigarette, other)





## The study

• 2017/2019 study with smokers, quitters and vapers of the take-up of e-cigarettes in two deprived areas; some findings on barriers to take-up reported in:

Thirlway, F. (2019) Nicotine addiction as a moral problem: barriers to e-cigarette use for smoking cessation in two working-class areas. *Social Science & Medicine* vol. 238, p. 112498

 Study also included the tobacco and e-cigarette industry context, including research with vape shops in the same areas supplemented by document and policy analysis
 currently writing this up







#### Also reported here



#### Tackling smoking: never mind health, we need to talk about price

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**Frances Thirlway** explains why smokers' concerns about addiction provide an unlikely but compelling rationale for making a minimum price strategy a central part of tobacco control.

People stop smoking for health reasons, right? We all know the link between smoking and cancer, not to mention heart disease, stroke and many other conditions. But that doesn't

necessarily mean we stop smoking or switch to a less risky alternative such as e-cigarettes. Smoking rates continue to be high in the most deprived areas of England, Scotland and Wales, and health advocates are

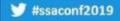
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#### How can we address health inequalities related to smoking?

- Smoking rates continue to be high in the most deprived areas
- health advocates are constantly looking for new ways to highlight the health effects
- but many working-class smokers are more concerned about being addicted than about the damage to their health







#### Why do people feel bad about nicotine addiction?

- UK approach both in the drug field and more recently in tobacco control has been to medicalise substance use i.e. to define it as a medical problem rather than a moral one
- but ordinary smokers saw their own addiction as a moral issue in 2 ways (Flanagan 2013)
  - > sense of personal failure resulting from failed attempts to quit

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> guilt about the financial cost involved e.g. diverting financial resources from the family

#### Flanagan, O. (2013). "The shame of addiction." Frontiers in Psychiatry 4:







### **Reconciling smoking with guilt about addiction**

- they tried to stop, but they often failed
- they kept trying but some despaired of ever managing to quit
- they reduced the guilt by spending as little as possible
  - = massive switch to cheaper tobacco AND/OR switch to vaping

The move to rolling tobacco and ultra-cheap brands is about moral identity – not just affordability





#### .. but they were reluctant e-cigarette users

- 'still addicted' because they vaped as often as they previously smoked
  = felt discouraged and relapsed to smoking
- tried to lower their nicotine is used their e-cig more often felt more addicted
- spent as little as possible on e-liquids = cheapest brands
- worried that nice flavours would make them 'more addicted'







## Price differential is key

- price differential with smoking key to the appeal of e-cigarettes to working-class smokers
- saving money meant feeling less guilty about addiction
- policy makers must ensure that entry-level vaping continues to be significantly cheaper than smoking, and ideally increase the differential





#### **Policy measures**

- ensure that e-cigarettes continue to be exempt from excise duty
- provide free starter kits to vulnerable smokers
- beware of regulation which favours closed over open systems

= tobacco industry strategy of tying consumers into more expensive products







# Price is the most effective way to address health inequalities linked to smoking

- making smoking more expensive is more people quitting, smoking less or switching
- real price of cheapest UK tobacco barely changed over the past fifteen years
- taxes on rolling tobacco are lower than on cigarettes
- tobacco industry has been gaming the system: absorbs tax increases on cheapest products to keep poorer smokers smoking + overshifts tax on expensive products to maximise its profits.





#### Raising the minimum tobacco price

- targeted interventions are needed to increase cheap tobacco/e-cigarettes price differential
- 2017 Minimum Excise Tax needs to increase further
- increase tax on rolling tobacco to close the gap
- Consider minimum unit price for tobacco
- or price cap regulation = to limit price differentials

On pricing options, see recent research by Professor Anna Gilmore and the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath (<u>@BathTR</u>).

