The Filter Fraud: Debunking the Myth of “Safer” as a Key New Strategy of Tobacco Control

Alan Blum MD: Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, University of Alabama School of Medicine, Tuscaloosa, AL, United States of America
Thomas E. Novotny, MD MPH: San Diego State University, Cigarette Butt Pollution Project, San Diego, CA, United States of America

References


Policy Options to Eliminate the Filter Fraud

Rationale | Jurisdiction | Likely Outcome
--- | --- | ---
Product labeling (8) | National | Modest impact on smoker behavior
Ligation (9) | Local, state, national | De-normalization of tobacco use, internalization of environmental and health costs
Extended producer responsibility (10) | Local, state, national | Higher cost of distribution
Banning sale of filtered cigarettes (3) | Local, state, national | De-normalizes smoking, reduced consumption
Public education & Counter-advertising (11) | National | Increased public awareness of fraud

Background

Although efforts have been made to eliminate the use of misleading descriptors such as “low tar,” “lights,” and “mild” from cigarette marketing, the elimination of the cigarette filter—which is on 99.7% of cigarettes (sold in U.S.) has been largely overlooked as a tobacco control strategy. The 2014 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking and the 2001 U.S. National Cancer Institute Monograph 13 report that the near-universal adoption by smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1950s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the source of significant environmental tobacco product waste.

Ninety Years of Filter Fraud

1. In the 1950s, confronted with declining cigarette sales after the publication of research studies linking smoking to lung cancer, tobacco companies began producing filter tipped brands that were claimed to remove certain components of the smoke, which manufacturers never acknowledged to be harmful. This included use of charcoal, asbestos, and other materials. Kent “Micronite” filters marketed in 1950s contained asbestos (3).
2. Lower machine-measured tar and nicotine yields were thought by smokers to be “low tar,” “lights,” and “mild” from cigarette marketing, the elimination of the cigarette filter (which is on 99.7% of cigarettes sold in U.S.) has been largely overlooked as a tobacco control strategy. The 2014 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking and the 2001 U.S. National Cancer Institute Monograph 13 report that the near-universal adoption by smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1950s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the source of significant environmental tobacco product waste.
3. The use of ventilation in cigarette filters has also failed to make them safer and easier for youth to start smoking and discourage smokers from quitting. The 2014 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking and the 2001 U.S. National Cancer Institute Monograph 13 report that the near-universal adoption by smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1950s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the source of significant environmental tobacco product waste.
4. The tobacco industry has known for decades that the filter does not provide protection from the adverse health consequences of smoking (7). Toxic Tobacco Product Waste

1. Most filters are made of cellulose acetate, a non-biodegradable plastic material which, as discarded waste, are the single most common waste item picked up over the last 30 years on beaches and urban cleanups worldwide (4).
2. The leachates produced by soaking butts for 96 hours in fresh or salt water have been found to have a LSD5 of test fish of one cigarette butt/litter. According to this U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Protocol, cigarette butts should therefore be considered toxic hazardous waste and regulated as such (5).
3. 5.6 Trillion Smoked Each Year, 2/3 dumped into environment
4. The leachates produced by soaking butts for 96 hours in fresh or salt water have been found to have a LSD5 of test fish of one cigarette butt/litter. According to this U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Protocol, cigarette butts should therefore be considered toxic hazardous waste and regulated as such (5).
5. 5.6 Trillion Smoked Each Year, 2/3 dumped into environment
6. The tobacco industry has known for decades that the filter does not provide protection from the adverse health consequences of smoking (7).

Conclusions

1. There is sufficient evidence that cigarette filters are a fraud, primarily acting as a marketing tool with which the tobacco industry has deceived the public into believing there is some ‘health benefit’ from smoking filtered cigarettes compared with unfiltered cigarettes.
2. The cellulose acetate filter comprises the bulk of tobacco product waste, which can be considered a toxic hazardous waste product and therefore further regulated to reduce resource waste and exposure.
3. The use of ventilation in cigarette filters has also failed to make them safer and easier for youth to start smoking and discourage smokers from quitting. The 2014 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking and the 2001 U.S. National Cancer Institute Monograph 13 report that the near-universal adoption by smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1950s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the source of significant environmental tobacco product waste.
4. The tobacco industry has known for decades that the filter does not provide protection from the adverse health consequences of smoking (7).

Policy Options to Eliminate the Filter Fraud

Rationale | Jurisdiction | Likely Outcome
--- | --- | ---
Product labeling (8) | National | Modest impact on smoker behavior
Ligation (9) | Local, state, national | De-normalization of tobacco use, internalization of environmental and health costs
Extended producer responsibility (10) | Local, state, national | Higher cost of distribution
Banning sale of filtered cigarettes (3) | Local, state, national | De-normalizes smoking, reduced consumption
Public education & Counter-advertising (11) | National | Increased public awareness of fraud

Contacts

Alan Blum MD
Department of Family Medicine, University of Alabama, Email: ablum@ua.edu, Website: http://occh.ua.edu
Phone: 1-205.348.2880

Thomas E. Novotny, MD MPH
Graduate School of Public Health, San Diego State University
Cigarette Butt Pollution Project
814 Moana Drive, San Diego CA 92106
Email: tnvotny@ucsd.edu
Website: www.cigwaste.org
Phone: 1-619-206-3806

References

3. 3. Banning the sale of filtered cigarettes is likely to reduce cigarette consumption, to reduce health costs, and to increase public awareness of fraud. JAMA 2017;318(8):739-740.
5. 5. Further research is needed on the health and behavioral impact of removing filters from the global cigarette market, but banning the sale of filtered cigarettes may be taken now without further research.