Smoke and mirrors behind FDA report on e-cigarettes

By ACSH Staff — September 1, 2011

An FDA-authored analysis of electronic cigarette contents has just appeared in the Journal of Liquid Chromatography and Related Technologies. The agency has, in the past, gone out of its way to find hypothetical dangers of e-cigarettes even going so far as to try to bar their importation (a Federal judge stopped that attempt). This most recent article s slant is in keeping with the FDA s enduring prejudice against this clean nicotine delivery device.

The study, performed by the the agency s Division of Pharmaceutical Analysis, aimed to determine the levels of nicotine and nicotine-related by-products in the cartridges, refill solutions, and vapor of e-cigarettes from three different manufacturers. They report that nicotine content labeling was not always accurate, that nicotine is present in the smoke emitted, and that nicotine-related impurities in the contents of cartridges and refills varied from one manufacturer to another.

Unfortunately, observes ACSH friend and colleague Bill Godshall, Executive Director of Smokefree Pennsylvania, the findings are stated in a misleading and negative way, unnecessarily obscuring the actual benefits of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation device. (For instance, the agency s consistent referral to e-cigarette vapor as smoke suggests that it is similar to the carcinogenic combustion of cigarettes which is not at all the case.) Such official misrepresentation is not surprising, he notes, considering that the report was written by those involved in the FDA s biased 2009 report during their ill-fated attempt to ban such products.

The variable level of nicotine in e-cigarettes doesn t mean that they re less helpful, or dangerous, says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. However, he notes, there is almost always some level of agenda-based misinformation present when the FDA discusses e-cigarettes. (See, for instance, the agency s often cited yet incorrect claim to have detected one of the ingredients of antifreeze in some e-cigarettes.)

The truth is, says Dr. Ross, the amount of so-called carcinogens in e-cigarette vapor is no greater than in any other nicotine replacement product. The e-cigarette happens to be a very useful smoking cessation device that is much, much less toxic than cigarettes. We don t yet have all the answers about their benefits and risks; these data are being accumulated now. For government authorities and other groups to condemn and attempt to ban them makes no sense: it blocks a product that s clearly safe in the short term, while another, highly dangerous one remains on the market.