E-cigarettes: Gateway to nowhere slope is not so slippery, after all.

By ACSH Staff — November 1, 2013

While many public health experts well-versed in tobacco issues believe that e-cigarettes may be a major improvement in helping addicted smokers quit, a concern among others has been whether the devices might instead encourage non-smokers (especially teens) to experiment and then become nicotine addicted and even take up cigarettes, acting like a gateway drug. A new study [2] suggests that scenario is highly unlikely, finding instead that more-than-occasional use of e-cigarettes occurred in exactly one student.

In September, the CDC and the FDA issued a report [3] which seemed to indicate a doubling in teen use of e-cigarettes between 2011 and 2012. Subsequently, many physicians, anti-tobacco organizations, and some officials including over 40 Attorneys-General urged the FDA to regulate e-cigarettes as tobacco products, which would have effectively banned them for a period of at least several years. The report, issued as Notes from the Field a forum usually reserved for updates on epidemic contagions and other urgent matters seemed pretty clear at first glance, and led to quite an uproar, which is still underway.

However, a review of the actual data behind the report, from the National Youth Tobacco Survey, revealed a different picture from the scary scenario painted in the CDC s press juggernaut. The number of teens actually using e-cigarettes (vaping) more than once a month was tiny [4]. Some believe that a key factor in the CDC s distorted interpretation of their data is that the FDA s Center for Tobacco Products (headed by Mitchell Zeller) has announced that it will soon issue its ruling on how it plans to regulate e-cigarettes, a highly contentious and crucial decision. Further, it is no secret that the CDC, its head Dr. Tom Frieden, and a co-author of the report Dr. Tim McAfee are fervent opponents of endorsing e-cigarettes as a cessation agent or a harm-reduction tool.

The new study, presented at the American Association of Cancer Research meeting earlier this week, was undertaken by researchers led by Dr. Theodore Wagener, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Oklahoma. He surveyed 1,300 college students about their tobacco and nicotine use. The average age of study participants was 19. According to a HealthDay/WebMD report [5], out of the 1,300 responses, 43 students said their first nicotine product was an e-cigarette. Of that group, only one person said they went on to smoke regular cigarettes. And the vast majority who started with e-cigarettes said they weren't currently using any
nicotine or tobacco.

"It didn’t seem as though it really proved to be a gateway to anything," said Wagener, who presented his findings at a meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research [6], in National Harbor, Md.

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, who has been following the e-cigarette story quite closely, commented: The manipulation of data by scientists and anti-tobacco organizations to impede the truthful communication of the real risks and benefits of e-cigarettes to smokers is, in a word, sickening. The facts are that 45 million Americans are addicted to cigarettes, among whom over 400,000 die from cigarette smoking each year. Further, the FDA-approved products that these experts are addicted to don’t work so well this should make them stop and think when they issue false warnings. Instead of fearing and loathing the evil tobacco industry, I think the time has come when we should be investigating the evil ‘anti-tobacco industry’, whose monolithic disdain for harm reduction will certainly wind up killing American smokers.