

Prevalence and correlates of the belief that electronic cigarettes are a lot less harmful than conventional cigarettes under the different regulatory environments of Australia and the UK

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Abstract

Introduction: The rapid rise in electronic cigarettes (ECs) globally has stimulated much debate about the relative risk and public health impact of this new emerging product category as compared to conventional cigarettes. The sale and marketing of ECs containing nicotine are banned in many countries (eg, Australia) but are allowed in others (eg, United Kingdom). This study examined prevalence and correlates of the belief that ECs are a lot less harmful than conventional cigarettes under the different regulatory environments in Australia (ie, more restrictive) and the United Kingdom (ie, less restrictive).

Methods: Australian and UK data from the 2013 survey of the International Tobacco Control Four-Country project were analyzed.

Results: More UK than Australian respondents (58.5% vs. 35.2%) believed that ECs are a lot less harmful than conventional cigarettes but more respondents in Australia than in the United Kingdom selected “Don’t Know” (36.5% vs. 17.1%). The proportion that responded “A little less, equally or more harmful” did not differ between countries. Correlates of the belief that ECs are “A lot less harmful” differed between countries, while correlates of “Don’t Know” response did not differ.

Conclusions: Consistent with the less restrictive regulatory environment affecting the sale and marketing of ECs, smokers and recent ex-smokers in the United Kingdom were more likely to believe ECs were less harmful relative to conventional cigarettes compared to those in Australia.

Implications: What this study adds: Among smokers and ex-smokers, this study found that the belief that ECs are (a lot) less harmful than conventional cigarettes was considerably higher in the United Kingdom than in Australia in 2013. The finding is consistent with the less restrictive regulatory environment for ECs in the United Kingdom, suggesting that the regulatory framework for ECs adopted by a country can affect smokers’ perceptions about the relative harmfulness of ECs, the group that stands to gain the most from having an accurate belief about the relative harms of ECs.

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