

# Vaping saves lives

So why on earth is everyone so keen to ban it?

MATT RIDLEY

Few people have heard of Hon Lik, which is a pity because he's probably saved more lives already than anybody else I have met. Twelve years ago, he invented vaping — the idea of getting nicotine vapour from an electronic device rather than a miniature bonfire between your lips. Vaping is driving smoking out at an extraordinary rate, promising to achieve what decades of public health measures have largely failed to do. And it is doing so without official encouragement, indeed with some official resistance.

Via an interpreter, and sucking on an electronic pipe, Mr Hon told me how it happened. And here is the key point, the one that panjandrums of public health still seem to miss. He invented vaping in order to stop smoking, and that's what it's used for today.

He says he was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day while working as a chemist at the Liaoning Provincial Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine. He thought: 'How can I quit?' He tried cold turkey several times and failed. In 2001 he tried a nicotine patch but it gave him nightmares when he forgot to take it off at night, and it failed to replicate the initial rush of a cigarette.

Being a chemist with a penchant for electronics, he went into the laboratory and set about emulating the effect of smoke without a fire. The lab where he worked had a good supply of pure nicotine, used for calibrating other products. He needed to find a way to vaporise it instantly, and began with ultrasound, later turning to a heating element.

His first machine was a monster. By 2003 he had filed a patent on a smaller, more practical model. 'I already knew it would be a revolutionary product,' he told me with a smile. 'Some in China have called it the fifth invention — after navigation, fire, printing and paper,' he laughs. 'But that's too much.'

He went to work on miniaturising the device further, and refining the mechanism for vaporising nicotine in response to a puff. Why did he do it, I asked. 'To solve a social problem,' he replied. 'Quitting is suffering.'

After eight months of toxicology testing by the Pharmaceutical Authority in Liaoning and by the Chinese military's medical institute, the product went on sale. There was modest interest in China, but it was only when firms began selling versions in Europe and North America, about eight years ago, that the vaping revolution took off.

Today more than a million smokers in Britain have quit by using e-cigarettes, and at least another million have cut down. The number is growing all the time, and it's now easily the most popular method of quitting tobacco. That means a lot less lung cancer, heart disease, stinky clothing and fire risk. What's more, none of these people had to get a prescription, or be subsidised by the taxpayer or treated by the NHS, as with other methods of quitting such as patches, gum, psychiatry or acupuncture. It's a purely voluntary, private-sector solution.



You would think the public health authorities would be shouting this from the rooftops, but the Welsh government is trying to ban the use of e-cigarettes in enclosed public spaces, the British Medical Association remains implacably disapproving, the World Health Organisation censorious, and the European Commission set on banning refillable versions. Southern Rail is banning vaping on its trains from next month, and Starbucks, Caffè Nero, All Bar One, and KFC also have bans.

The opponents fear that vaping is a gateway into smoking, when all the evidence suggests it's a floodgate out. The number of 'never smokers' who vape remains negligible. I am genuinely baffled by how hard it is to get medics to understand the concept of harm reduction: that if people are doing

something harmful but hard to give up, you should encourage them to switch to something much less harmful that satisfies their urges. They talk of vaping as 'renormalising smoking', which makes about as much sense as saying coffee-drinking renormalises whisky-drinking. It's denormalising smoking.

There is a hint that these die-hard prohibitionists are losing allies, though. The anti-smoking group Ash, the British Heart Foundation, the Royal College of Physicians and even Cancer Research UK have come out against the Welsh ban, and effectively in favour of letting vaping drive out smoking. The penny is dropping.

Perhaps we should do a controlled experiment. Divide the country in two. In one part — let's call it Wales — we regulate e-cigarettes as medicines, ban their use in enclosed public places, restrict advertising, ban the sale of refillable versions, and ban the sale of e-cigarettes stronger than 20 milligrams per millilitre. All these measures have been urged or are in the pipeline.

In the other part, England, we leave them as consumer products, regulated as such, let them be advertised as glamorous, let them be used on trains and in pubs, allow the sale of refills, allow the sale of flavoured ones, and allow stronger products. We encourage their use: the Health Secretary even goes on television to urge smokers to try them. In which country would the death rate fall fastest?

Given that there is no evidence that vaping is harmful, that the toxic contents of vapour are far, far fewer and less abundant than those of smoke, and that most experts think vaping is a thousand times safer than smoking, it is a racing certainty that England would see the better outcome.

Mr Hon now works for Fontem Ventures, a Dutch-based subsidiary of Imperial Tobacco. (He says he is at last looking forward to making some serious money from his invention.) The fact that the tobacco industry has bought up many of the small firms that dominated the vaping industry in its first decade makes doctors highly suspicious.

They have hated Big Tobacco for so long that they cannot bring themselves to believe it might abandon the weed. Their conspiracy theory is that the tobacco industry is getting hold of this technology so it can win back society's support for something that at least looks like smoking and then — bang! — at the appropriate moment announce that smoking has become acceptable again. Or something. It's that illogical.

Isn't it much more likely that tobacco executives looked across at vaping firms a few years ago and realised that if they didn't join them they would be beaten by them? It would be their Kodak moment — like when the huge film firm failed to adapt to the digital photography revolution and died. It is surely great news if the tobacco industry turns itself into a nicotine-vapour industry instead and stops killing people.

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