Smokers' understandings of nicotine replacement therapies and electronic cigarettes

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Research Questions

**Aim**: to explore how nicotine-containing products (NCPs) are understood and experienced by smokers and recent ex-smokers.

1. What understanding do smokers and recent ex-smokers have of the risks and benefits of different NCPs?
2. How do these understandings shape their attitudes towards and experiences of short and long-term use of different NCPs?
3. Are NCPs understood differently by different groups of smokers?
Study design

- Qualitative study combining focus groups and interviews
- Focussed on 4 groups of smokers: low SES, mental health issues, smoking-related illnesses, young adults
- Focus group discussions
  - 12 focus groups with 2-8 participants
  - Participants recruited through community and interest groups
- Semi-structured interviews
  - 11 individual interviews
  - Additional recruitment via an advert on Gumtree
- Topics explored: understandings of smoking and the process of quitting; attitudes towards, and experiences with, different products (using pictures of and actual products as examples); knowledge and views about harm reduction ideas.
- Took place in central Scotland between September 2013 and February 2014
## Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Smoker</th>
<th>Ex-smoker</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus group</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>64</td>
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**Age (mean)**

- Smoker: 33 years
- Ex-smoker: 42 years
- Total: 36 years
Nicotine replacement therapy

- Most participants were familiar with a range of types of NRT and had tried one or two (patches and gum/lozenge)
- Seen as medical - for those who want to stop smoking

“Maybe these ones [indicates patches] are more being used by friends who are seriously, seriously wanting to stop, and these ones [indicates gum], I would have said, are being used for long haul flights or they’re working during the day and they can’t get out for a cigarette.” (Int01, F, 50, ex-smoker)
E-cigarettes ("vapourisers")

- Rapidly evolving arena
- Some knowledge of e-cigarettes
  - seen them in shops
  - seen people using them
  - knew someone who had tried one
- Different categories
- New and ambiguous

"The ones that are Nicorette, you would do that if you just wanted to stop smoking and that's it, but the e-cigs, like, you want to stop smoking, but you still want to have... have something." (Int03, F, 31, smoker)
Different types of smokers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enjoy smoking</th>
<th>Smoking is important to me</th>
<th>Worried about smoking</th>
<th>Dissatisfied with smoking</th>
<th>Unhappy with smoking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No interest in quitting</td>
<td>Don’t feel able to quit at the moment</td>
<td>Find quitting difficult</td>
<td>Feel confident about quitting</td>
<td>Recently quit smoking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“As a nurse, I know exactly all the dangers... and I don’t want to stop smoking right now…”
(Int01, F, 50)

“I hate it. I only do it because I’m addicted to nicotine.”
(Int10, F, 41)

“I’m starting to notice the benefits now... I can walk up stairs. I can walk to my work, I can breathe easier…”
(FG3, F, 51)

“I like smoking, but I’ve got health problems that I need to think about to stop smoking... my cigarette is my stress buster... it’s so hard to give up, it’s so addictive”
(FG8, F, 47)

“I had given up, but just recently I’ve started again. But I’m planning to give up again... I have given up for close to 9 months in the past. So I know I can do it again”
(Int05, M, 41)
Approaches to e-cigarettes

E-cigarettes emerged from participants talk as an ambiguous product whose meanings are still being negotiated. We found a range of attitudes towards them:

• Not interested
• Potentially interested
• Definitely interested
Not interested

‘Slippery slope’

• Recent ex-smokers, concerned about health.
• Not particularly interested in e-cigarettes – too similar to smoking (‘hand to mouth’).
• Stressed the important role willpower plays in stopping smoking and need to ‘break the habit’.
• Main concerns:
  • continuing addiction
  • relapse back to smoking
  • safety of products/what they contain/trust in retailer
Continued addiction as a risk

M2: As part of our cutting down, bought the electronic cigarettes, but the problem is that you sit and puff and puff with them and ten minutes later you have a fag... [Agreement]

F2: Because you're still puffing, you’re still physically...

M2: That's what [Group co-ordinator] said: it's important to break the habit [...] She said the electronic cigarettes are not good on that, and from having used them at the beginning of the year, you maybe had a few less cigarettes a day as result, but...

M1: ...and it was half-hearted, it felt half-hearted having the e-cigarette [...] it was like because we weren’t stopping you would have one of them and then you would have a real cigarette. [...] 

F1: ...Somebody I know has replaced cigarettes with e-cigarettes, she’s been on e-cigarettes for three years...

M2: ...It’s still better than smoking...

F1: She’s doing it in her work, she’s in the back shop, because she’s not smoking, she’s outside, she’s got it in her hand 24/7. So, has she really, psychologically stopped? No, I don't think she could give it up.

F2: Like hand to mouth.

Mod: So, would you be worried about that?

F1: To me, she’s still a smoker, psychologically, she’s still a smoker. She may not be getting the bad effects from the cigarettes, tobacco and that, but she’s getting the nicotine, she’s still feeding her habit.

(FG3-smoking cessation group, ex-smokers)
Not interested

‘I would rather smoke a fag’

- Mainly young smokers, unconcerned about health, not interested in quitting (some older smokers).
- Not particularly interested in e-cigarettes – happy smoking.
- Curious about e-cigarettes – novelty value (packaging and flavours).
- Unsure whether they are healthier for you than smoking?
What’s the point of using an e-cigarette?

M3: Oh, I dinnae like those ones, because they dinnae look like fags. I only like the ones that look like fags.

M1: They’re minging, but.

M3: **I just like fags. I just like the taste of fag.** Nothing can take the taste of a real fag away, like. [...] 

Co: So you don’t like them?

M4: I don’t know, I’ve not tried them [Vapouriser]. I tasted the **E-lite** and it was alright, it tasted like a real fag, but it’s heavy as fuck. You walk about like that... it’s like metal. I wouldn’t use that.

Mod: Why not?

M1: **What’s the point of smoking that? It’s not healthy for you.** What’s the point? Those fags are just the same, they’re not healthy, you might as well just smoke fags.

M3: Those ones are alright, man.

M1: They’re not healthy.

M3: They’ve got tar and carbon monoxide in them.

M1: **You’re still smoking nicotine, but.**

M3: You’re still smoking nicotine, but you’re not smoking tar and you’re not making your lungs... you’re not making your lungs get covered in tar.

(FG4-young adults, 16-24, smokers)
Potentially interested

• This group was mostly participants who were thinking about making a change to their smoking but had no immediate intentions to stop.
• Some thought they might use e-cigarettes short-term to wean them off smoking; others saw them as a cheaper alternative.

• Main uncertainties/concerns:
  • knowing what to choose
  • knowing how to use them
  • feeling self-conscious using it in public
  • too similar to smoking
  • safety of products/what they contain/trust in retailer

• Potential benefits
  • saving money
  • better for you
  • similar to smoking
Uncertainties

I don’t know how to use them because I was talking to somebody the other day about them. Now, if you smoke a cigarette, you smoke a cigarette until it’s finished. How many puffs do you take out of one of these? You could sit there and puff [laughs] on it for ages, whereas a cigarette is over and done with. (Int01, F, 50, smoker)

Yes, I mean, and when I was thinking about cutting down I did intend on buying one of these, sort of, vapourisers, but it seemed like too much hassle. All these various types of liquid. All these different solutions. [...] I’ve just seen these online, and what put me off them was because you go online, and it was all these very cheap looking websites, and you don’t know really what you can trust. (Int09, M, 25, smoker)
Definitely interested

• Tended to be participants who were concerned about the impact of smoking on their health, saw themselves as addicted and found it very difficult to stop smoking.

• This group used e-cigarettes as a substitute for smoking or to help them cut down the number of cigarettes they smoke.

• Common benefits identified:
  • healthier
  • save money
  • satisfying replacement
  • no guilt/ hassle about smoking or cutting down use

• Main concerns:
  • not quite as effective as smoking
  • safety of products/what they contain/trust in retailer
Health & anxiety: between a rock & a hard place

For me, it really was just to kick the smoking. And sometimes now I just feel so good, you know, just... and to be honest with you, after a week I felt so much better, just my chest and my breathing and no coughing, I felt so much better. (Int02, F, 47, ex-smoker/vaper)

The problem for some psychiatric patients is that, I guess for some others as well, is the angst, anguish or anxiety as an existential state is almost intolerable without the help of cigarettes so it’s difficult to see how we could carry on in a sensible and meaningful way. So we’re really between the devil and the deep blue sea or a rock and a hard place. I think that with some sort of substitute that anxiety might be alleviated in some way. (Int07, M, 48, smoker)
Cross-cutting concerns and benefits

Consensus
• Better than smoking, but...
• General concerns about being confident in the safety of products and what they contain.

Divergence
• Likeness to a cigarette – benefit or concern?
• Are they supposed to be a quitting aid or replacement for smoking?
• Attitudes on continuing nicotine addiction varied across the different groups of smokers.
Cross-cutting concern: what is actually in them?!

The only thing that worries me is no really knowing what those chemicals, you know, ‘cause you are breathing them in, and not really knowing, (1) what they are, and (2), because when you buy that [...] I bought like four of them [refill bottles], for all my friends, and they were all cinnamon but they were all different colours. So, I mean, so you don’t even know who’s mixing them, or what’s actually in them, or is one stronger than the other? (Int02, F, 47, ex-smoker/vaper)

M2: I'd be worried about what is exactly in any of the replacements. This has got more warnings on it than a cigarette packet [Reading iBreathe menthol refill]. It's harmful if swallowed, if swallowed you need to take this lot with you and seek immediate medical advice [snorts]. So I wouldn't... “Wash arms and forearms thoroughly after each use”!

F1: And forearms! [Laughter] Maybe if Boots did one or something you might trust it more, but all these...we've never even heard of this company. So I don't know, it just seems a bit...

(FG1-smoking cessation group, 36/29, ex-smokers)
Cross-cutting concerns and benefits

**Consensus**
- Better than smoking, but...
- General concerns about being confident in the safety of products and what they contain.

**Divergence**
- Likeness to a cigarette – benefit or concern?
- Are they supposed to be a quitting aid or replacement for smoking?
- Attitudes on continuing nicotine addiction varied across the different groups of smokers.
Concluding thoughts

• Ambiguity – role of e-cigarettes still being negotiated; wide range of meanings/uses/images.

• Language/terminology: ‘e-cigarettes’, ‘vapourisers’; ‘smoke’, ‘vape’, ‘use’ (continuity with smoking?).

• Multi-faceted understandings of risk and addiction (individual, physical, psychological, control...).

• Some smokers find e-cigarettes beneficial; however, wide range of uncertainties/concerns – not necessarily using for harm reduction.

• Need for clear, consistent, up to date information about risks, benefits and current regulatory oversight.
Acknowledgements

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