



## Time for a smokeless society?

With 'no-smoking' signs popping up increasingly and European anti-smoking campaign on the rise, the discussion is focusing on a "new", yet more than 200 year old, product named snuff, 'snus' or: smokeless tobacco. Recent studies have shown that smokeless tobacco, namely snus, which users place between their lip and gum, is a good alternative for chain smokers who are unable or unwilling to quit tobacco and nicotine entirely and involves significantly lower risks than smoking cigarettes –none for the passive smokers-, while being at the same time a way out from smoking. Swedish men are the living example of the above. Even though snuff has been banned in all EU countries except Sweden since 1992, one cannot overlook the fact that in Sweden, whilst 'snus' is more widely used by men than cigarettes, men also have the lowest rate of lung cancer in Europe.

By **Spyros Pappas**

A growing body of research claims that smokeless tobacco "is not 100 per cent safe" but is not as dangerous as smoking, since tobacco as such is not deadly, the harm is in the smoke. Brad Rodu, professor and director of the University of Louisville's tobacco harm-reduction research program in the U.S., states that smokeless tobacco use has, at most, two per cent of the health risks of smoking. Nevertheless, some health experts remain torn between the desire to see people stop smoking and warn of the side-effects if patients make an excessive use of snus.

The tobacco industry has been hostile to its introduction on the market, advocating its alleged dangers. One can easily see through this argument though: Basically, snuff constitutes a serious threat to the cigarette producers' own products. Yet, cigarette giants are, nowadays, either starting to acquire smokeless purveyors or producing their own smokeless products, which usually carry the same brand name as their cigarettes. Is it a move for business or politics? In the light of the above, it becomes clear that, rather than public health concerns, it is the interests of the tobacco industry that are at stake here.

For example, British American Tobacco itself is increasingly investing in moist-snuff tobacco. This represents a significant strategic move linked to the rapid growth rates of the snuff market in the last five years in the US. Indeed, once the 'trademark' of baseball players and the rural poor, the use of snuff is becoming more and more popular.

In light of the growing introduction of new smokeless tobacco products, the advantages of which can no longer be ignored by regulators, interesting proposals have been put forward to create national regulatory authorities, similar to the Food Standard Agency in the UK. The function of such an Agency would be to control and contain the tobacco industry and reconfigure the system so as to prioritise public health, with the aim of perhaps later creating a European agency.

The Commission contemplated a regulatory framework that would apply to all (smokeless) tobacco products and eliminate those that are, indeed, harmful. This proposal is, in principle, welcomed, since it would, at the same time, create a level playing field within the EU for those smokeless tobacco providers whose products do not threaten, but rather promote public health.

The European Commission underlined the considerably less harmful character of Swedish 'snus', but remained, up to now, reluctant to abolish the EU ban on smokeless tobacco, which is not harmless and contains toxic varieties. However, this stance has been criticised since it does not correspond to the Commission's obligations to restore the Internal Market and duly support national health policies. The first argument thereto is that the Internal Market for tobacco is a victim of erroneous public health assumptions. Secondly, it is suggested that the Community does not take into account the fact that this form of tobacco is less harmful and thus beneficial to the EU citizens. The latter would also be compatible with the Commission's campaign against smoking, since smokeless tobacco can be used as a complementary tool for these purposes. Ideally, the Community objective is to open the Internal Market for tobacco all together while ensuring a high level of health protection.

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