

## Reviewer's report

**Title:** You Might as Well Smoke; the misleading and harmful public message about smokeless tobacco

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 5 January 2005

**Reviewer:** John Kalmar

### Reviewer's report:

General

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Although an intriguing and important piece of work, the manuscript in its current form is unnecessarily repetitive and overly charged with emotion. This detracts from the primary message (i.e. lack of differentiation of the relative health risks of ST versus smoking) and likely creates tension within the most open-minded reader that their obvious bias is somehow based in something other than fact.

For example, the first subheading is entitled: Unethical messages. It is unclear how the failure of health experts, clinicians and policy makers to provide fully up-to-date, accurate information about the relative risks of various forms of consumed tobacco is unethical. Why is it just not laziness or a failure of many of the websites (and so-called experts) to truly examine and better align their messages with newer epidemiologic evidence? The authors need to better support their claims or find a way to express their thesis that poor, often confusing and often wrong information about the risks of tobacco uses is being presented without invoking intention, forethought and malice. That being said, the authors are right to mention that some of the confusion may be due to intentionally vague or misleading statements. Without such balance, the work could easily be dismissed as an extended rant on the conspiracy of government agencies and their websites against the manufacturers of smokeless tobacco products.

The writing style is clear, but there is tendency to ramble and repeat ideas without additive information. Use of a more focused, outline-type style may help the authors present their message without the distraction of an overly-emotional tone.

Specific points:

Introduction, 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence:  
should this read ...even that association may NOT apply...?

Results, Explicit Claims of Equal Risk, last paragraph:  
The recent comments of the US Surgeon General do not belong in this portion of the manuscript. As noted by the authors, this came subsequent to data gathering. Although appropriate to the point of this manuscript, this should be worked into the conclusions.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the

author can be trusted to correct)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have served as an ad-hoc consultant for the U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company in the area of litigation support.