Reviewer's report

Title: A Qualitative Assessment of the Perceived Risks of Electronic Cigarette and Hookah Use in Pregnancy

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Reviewer: Michael Ussher

Reviewer's report:

This is a qualitative study entailing interviews with 87 pregnant women about electronic cigarettes (ECs). It focusses on the women’s perceived risks and stigma associated with using ECs. The interviews are generally well conducted, although they have a narrow focus. The study is mainly by the absence of data available to characterise the women. Also the tone of the paper is biased against electronic cigarettes and nicotine in general, rather than presenting the evidence more objectively.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. It is a major limitation that no data is available on participants related to demographics, smoking status or experience of using ECs. This limitation needs to be highlighted in the discussion. Without this data the findings are difficult to interpret.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Background, p. 4, line 37: I don’t think it is appropriate to use the term ‘alarming’. This is very subjective.

2. Background, p. 5, line 61: When referring to studies assessing ECs for smoking cessation, I suggest the authors reference the Cochrane review:

3. p. 5, lines 61-62: I think it is misleading to say that “However, it has been widely reported that use of the nicotine patch, as a method to quit smoking during pregnancy, is ineffective [12-14].” It would be more reasonable to say “Use of the nicotine patch as a method to quit smoking during pregnancy has not been shown to be effective, possibly due to higher metabolism of nicotine in pregnancy or lower adherence [12-14].” I also suggest referencing the Cochrane review here instead of ref 12:
4. p. 5, lines 62-66. This sentence is difficult to follow:

“Due to known adverse effects of smoking on the fetus, pregnant women are counseled on smoking cessation but there are presently no clear recommendations as to whether nicotine replacement therapy in pregnancy substantially increases the likelihood of successful cessation in the absence of risk of additional nicotine exposure.”

Please check the grammar for the latter half of the sentence and possibly divide into two sentences.

5. In the Background section I suggest the authors refer to previous studies relating to pregnancy and ECs. Of the studies not mentioned, these are the ones I am aware of:


6. At the bottom of p. 5 I suggest the authors make a more balanced argument about the evidence for the likely effects of prenatal exposure to nicotine. For example, this recent study, and the largest to date, showed a benefit for use of NRT on infant development:


8. p. 8: line 130, please make clear whether informed consent was written or verbal, and if verbal whether it was audio recorded.

9. The usual convention is to assigned a code number to each participant and indicate this next to any quotes. This needs to be added or if it is not available it should be mentioned as a limitation.

10. In the Discussion, p. 15, line 279-281, I think it is misleading to say that “Electronic cigarette use among middle and high school students is quickly becoming a major public health issue.” because the data mostly relates to whether individuals have tried ECs. I am not aware of surveys suggesting that
large numbers of these students are using ECs on a regular basis.

11. The paragraph beginning on p. 16 line 301 appears to be biased as it ignores that, at least among non-pregnant smokers, a consensus is emerging that for ECs compared with cigarettes potential benefits probably outweigh harms, and that ECs are likely to have an important role as a harm reduction strategy (e.g. Goniewicz et al 2013; Farsalinos & Polosa R 2014, McNeill et al 2015).


12. The limited number of Caucasians in the study needs to be mentioned as a limitation.

13. The conclusion that “Until such a time, it is our belief that clinicians should inform their patients that no amount of nicotine is known to be safe in pregnancy.” seems to be too strong a practice recommendation and should be tempered.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.