

Bill Rea ? Is vaping the alternative?

It's nice to know there are alternatives to conventional smoking, such as these electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) that we've been hearing about lately.

On the other hand, are they an alternative to the hazards of cigarettes?

Of late, I've been told of a man of my acquaintance who's been having some health issues. True, I haven't seen him in more than 20 years, and it's been about five years since we last spoke on the phone.

During the years when we spent a lot of time in each other's company, we were both heavy smokers. But it is a fact that things change over time. I quit smoking more than 20 years ago. From what I'm hearing these days, he did not. Also from the information I'm getting (and I stress it's at least second-hand), he switched to e-cigarettes. But it looks like his failure to quit smoking has caused him health issues. The advent of age might have something to do with it too. He's in his mid-60s. And it is also true that there could be a host of other factors impacting this guy's health of which I am unaware.

It appears there are still a lot of unanswered questions when it comes to e-cigarettes. I confess I'm not too up on the concept either. Since I am no longer a smoker, there's been no real reason to delve too much into the topic. I have no desire to take up smoking again. I am too well aware of how easy it is to get hooked.

I started smoking in high school during my teens because many of the people I hung around with at the time smoked, and anything that would make me feel 'in' with any crowd was worthwhile. That went on until I was in my early 30s. I made several half-hearted and unsuccessful attempts to quit, although when I finally got serious about it, I was a little surprised at how easy it was. And the urge to smoke has never completely gone away. Writing these words has made me recall the time when I smoked, and those memories have caused cravings. Not to worry, though. I have been resisting them for more than 20 years, and this time will be no different.

I would certainly not want to go through being hooked and trying to quit again.

Besides, I can't afford to smoke, and I sometimes wonder how I was able to afford it when I smoked throughout my 20s and early 30s.

Moreover, my wife won't let me take it up again.

I have done a bit of research into e-cigarettes, and the information I have come up with seems at best vague.

Peel Regional council last week approved a staff recommendation to support proposed changes to Ontario's smoking laws to cover e-cigarettes, as well as the use of medicinal marijuana. Essentially, the new rules would see bans imposed on the use of these materials in all enclosed public spaces, enclosed workplaces and certain other specified outdoor areas. There would also be restrictions on the marketing of e-cigarettes.

It seems to me the new proposed rules would mean you're only allowed to use an e-cigarette in a fashion that you're allowed to use a conventional cigarette.

I also note these recommendations come from people far more knowledgeable about the subject matter than I.

But it would seem to me that smoke is smoke, and in most cases, we try to avoid it.

If we come upon some open air burning, I think most of us try to position ourselves in such a way that the smoke is not being blown toward us. True, if the fire is part of a winter celebration on a cold day or night, some of us might try going downwind for a brief period, simply because it will be warm there. But it's been my experience that's not a good place to hang around for too long. It gets too hot pretty fast, and you're breathing in smoke, which is not very pleasant.

Yet there are certain types of smoke, such as that from tobacco, that people not only tolerate going into their lungs, but that they will pay a lot of money to obtain. Like I stated above, I can't afford the cost of a deck of smokes, and still can't figure out how I smoked a pack and a half a day in my prime.

But one of the key points I learned is e-cigarettes do not create smoke, but vapour, which I guess explains why the act of smoking an e-cigarette is sometimes called vaping. So while there is no tobacco, the vapour apparently contains nicotine, which is addictive.

And since it's a liquid source of nicotine, that can present some problems too.

One source I consulted, a website called health.howstuffworks.com, states that liquid nicotine can be deadly.

And according to the American Lung Association, e-cigarettes don't seem to be very useful when it comes to helping smokers quit. ?Instead of quitting, many e-cigarette users are continuing to use e-cigarettes while still using conventional cigarettes,? according to the Association's website. ?In 2013, 76.8 percent of the people who recently used e-cigarettes also currently smoked conventional cigarettes.?

The staff report that went to council last week noted that second-hand smoke from tobacco can create health problems for

non-smokers. That is nothing new. We've been hearing that for years. That's one of the main reasons why there are so few places where one can smoke.

And it's also clear that there's a lot that's not yet understood about vaping, and what it might do to people's health.

'The evidence for negative health impacts of vaping through the use of e-cigarettes is still emerging and inconclusive,' the report added. 'Smokers exhale some of the nicotine and ultrafine particles delivered by e-cigarettes, which exposes bystanders to 'passive vaping.' E-cigarette particles are small enough to reach deep into the lungs; however, the health risks from e-cigarettes' toxicants are still unknown, but can be considered a source of air pollution.'

If we're going to allow cigarettes, along with other tobacco products, to be consumed with various restrictions, then we can't very well get more restrictive on vaping, at least not until we have more information.

Should there be more restrictions of tobacco? I'm inclined to think there should be, but I'm not ready to sign on to a crusade to have it banned outright.

Tobacco, as it has been said many times, is a product that can cause serious illness or death if used as directed. But there are also people who smoke for decades and live to very impressive ages, like into their 90s. I can't see the benefits of forcing such a person to give up their tobacco. Indeed, I would think the strain of forcing them to quit would probably be harmful in itself.

The answer, I think, is finding ways to discourage people from taking up the habit in the first place. Steps have been taken in that direction. When I started smoking, cigarettes were prominently displayed in any variety store. Now they are not. Increasing taxes is not a bad idea either. And neither is putting restrictions on vaping. If people don't get into the alternatives, they might not be inclined to try the real thing.

