

World Conference on Tobacco Control 2025 (WCTC 2025): Summary Report

Introduction

The World Conference on Tobacco Control 2025 (WCTC 2025) convened global experts, policymakers, researchers, and advocates to address the evolving landscape of tobacco use and control. The conference covered a broad range of topics, reflecting both global and region-specific challenges, with a strong emphasis on protecting public health from the harms of tobacco and nicotine products.

Main Themes of WCTC 2025:

- **Tobacco Harm Reduction and New Nicotine Products:** Examination of the use, regulation, and health impacts of products such as vapes, e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products (HTPs), and nicotine pouches. Presentations assessed user demographics, behavioural trends, and comparative health outcomes, as well as the debate between harm reduction and traditional cessation methods.
- **Tobacco Industry Interference:** Detailed analysis of the industry's strategies to influence policy, regulation, and public perception. This included marketing through digital and social media, charitable activities, and partnerships with health professionals, alongside documentation of lobbying and circumvention of existing laws.
- **Tobacco Cessation Strategies:** Evaluation of interventions ranging from harm reduction (e.g., switching to lower-risk products) to non-harm reduction (e.g., quit lines, behavioural support, pharmacotherapy). The impact of policies such as taxation, advertising bans, and education initiatives was also discussed.
- **Policy, Regulation, and Enforcement:** Presentations explored the effectiveness of tobacco control policies, legal frameworks, compliance, and enforcement challenges, including endgame strategies aimed at phasing out tobacco use.
- **Vulnerable Populations and Equity:** Focus on the disproportionate burden of tobacco among youth, women, indigenous groups, and people with comorbidities, and strategies to address inequities in cessation support.
- **Surveillance, Research, and Capacity Building:** Use of technology (AI, mHealth) for monitoring tobacco use and policy implementation, and efforts to build research and leadership capacity in tobacco control.

Perspectives on Tobacco Harm Reduction and Novel Products

The conference featured a robust debate on tobacco harm reduction (THR):

- **Critical Perspectives:** The overwhelming sentiment was skeptical or negative toward harm reduction products. Most presenters argued that THR is promoted by the tobacco industry and serves to weaken tobacco control, confuse the public, and delay stronger regulation. Concerns included:
 - Increased youth uptake, especially via flavoured products and social media marketing.
 - Evidence of dual use (cigarettes plus e-products) sustaining addiction.
 - Insufficient evidence for population-level effectiveness in cessation.
 - The use of THR as a narrative to re-legitimise the tobacco industry and undermine progress.
- **Supportive Arguments (Minority View):** A small number of presentations, notably the updated Cochrane Living Systematic Review¹, suggested that e-cigarettes may help some people quit smoking, with quit rates comparable to some pharmacological interventions. There was also evidence that very low nicotine cigarettes combined with e-cigarettes could reduce harm, particularly for people with psychiatric conditions². However, these findings were presented with caution and the need for further research was emphasised.

¹ Presentation title: Newest findings from the Cochrane living systematic review of e-cigarettes for smoking cessation

² Presentation title: A randomized controlled trial of very low nicotine cigarettes plus electronic cigarettes in people with psychiatric disorders

- **Product-Specific Sentiments:**
 - **Vapes/E-cigarettes:** Mostly viewed as a public health threat, especially for youth, with limited support for use in tightly regulated cessation contexts.
 - **Nicotine Pouches:** Emerging concern due to rising youth interest and lack of regulation; insufficient evidence to support their use as cessation tools.
 - **Snus:** Strong negative sentiment, associated with industry tactics and lacking support as a cessation aid.

Tobacco Industry Interference

A dominant theme was the tobacco industry's persistent interference in public health policy and regulation:

- **Policy Manipulation:** The industry was shown to influence or delay tobacco control policies through lobbying, political donations, and exploiting regulatory loopholes. Case studies from Sri Lanka, India, and the Asia-Pacific highlighted industry infiltration into medical associations and governmental bodies.
- **Marketing and PR:** Use of digital marketing, social media, and charitable donations to maintain a positive public image and circumvent advertising bans was documented across multiple regions.
- **Targeting Health Professionals:** Unlawful promotion of new nicotine products to medical professionals was flagged as a tactic to gain legitimacy.
- **Countermeasures:** Presenters called for stronger implementation of WHO FCTC Article 5.3 to protect policy from industry interference, greater transparency, and the use of AI tools for real-time monitoring of digital marketing.

Cessation Tactics Promoted

The conference promoted a range of evidence-based, non-harm reduction cessation strategies:

- **Policy Measures:** Tax increases, advertising bans, graphic health warnings, and smoke-free policies were widely endorsed for their effectiveness in reducing tobacco use and social inequities.
- **Behavioural and Digital Interventions:** mHealth (mobile health), financial incentives, school-based programs, and community health worker engagement were highlighted as effective supports for cessation.
- **Education and Prevention:** Multi-pronged education campaigns, especially targeting youth and marginalised populations, were emphasised as critical for prevention and cessation.
- **Scepticism Toward Industry-Linked Products:** There was notable caution and scepticism about cessation products or programs linked to the tobacco industry, reflecting concerns about conflicts of interest and the potential undermining of public health goals.

Social Media Presence: #WCTC2025

Social media activity related to WCTC 2025 predominantly reflected positive engagement, with presenters and attendees highlighting the range of themes discussed, endorsing the conference's key messages, and expressing appreciation for the opportunity to participate. A minority of posts conveyed critical perspectives, asserting that the conference marginalised the voices of tobacco consumers, dismissed the potential role of tobacco harm reduction products in cessation, and questioned the relevance of tobacco control efforts. Negative views on the conference were predominantly limited to being shared on Twitter/X, while content on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn was largely neutral or supportive of the conference's objectives.

Conclusion: Key Messages

The World Conference on Tobacco Control 2025 delivered several clear messages:

- **Precaution and Regulation:** The dominant stance is precautionary, advocating for strong regulation of all nicotine products, with a particular focus on protecting youth and vulnerable populations.
- **Industry Vigilance:** There is a pressing need to counter tobacco industry interference at all levels of policy, research, and public health advocacy.

- **Cessation First:** The conference prioritised proven cessation strategies—policy measures, behavioural support, and education—over harm reduction products, which remain controversial, perceived to be a tobacco industry tactic, and insufficiently supported by evidence for broad adoption.
- **Equity and Global Focus:** Addressing disparities in tobacco burden and control, especially in low- and middle-income countries, is essential for global progress.

Overall, WCTC 2025 reinforced the importance of evidence-based policy, vigilance against industry tactics, and the centrality of cessation and prevention in the fight against tobacco-related harm.

Post - Conference Insights by Dr Derek Yach - Global Health Advocate

The Alternative World Tobacco Control Declaration, 2025

Noting with concern that the organizers of the 2025 World Conference on Tobacco Control have, in error, reiterated recommendations that reflect the priorities and realities of a decade past, and recognizing the urgent need for a modernized, evidence-based approach to accelerate the end of smoking and its profound burden of disease, I present this Alternative Declaration. It is not endorsed by World Health Organization

1. Commending Innovation and Harm Reduction

I congratulate leading tobacco, vape, and nicotine pouch companies for their substantial investment—totaling billions of dollars—in the development and distribution of innovative, reduced-risk nicotine products. I note that over 120 million adults worldwide, the vast majority of whom are former smokers, now use these products to lead longer and healthier lives.

2. Proportional Taxation to Promote Public Health

I call upon all governments to implement taxation policies for nicotine products that are strictly proportionate to the health risks they pose. Such fiscal measures should be carefully designed to avoid incentivizing illicit trade and to ensure that the most harmful products, namely combustible cigarettes, remain the most heavily taxed, while reduced-risk alternatives are more accessible to adult smokers seeking to quit.

3. Empowering Health Professionals and Expanding Access

I urge health professionals globally to redouble their efforts to improve access to effective cessation tools—including vapes, nicotine replacement therapies (NRTs), and nicotine pouches—for adult patients who smoke, especially those exhibiting early signs of cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, and tuberculosis.

4. Countering Misinformation with Science

We should launch a global initiative to counter persistent misinformation regarding nicotine and its alleged—but scientifically unsubstantiated—links to cancer, as well as to clarify the relative risks of next-generation products compared to cigarettes.

5. Investing in Research for Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)

I call upon governments, private foundations, pharmaceutical, tobacco, and vape companies to invest robustly in building research capacity within LMICs.

6. Supporting Tobacco Farmer Transitions

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Lets commit to building a global consortium of tobacco leaf users and stakeholders to support smallholder tobacco farmers in transitioning to more sustainable livelihoods as global demand for tobacco declines.

7. Ensuring Equitable Access to Diagnostics and Treatments

I support rapid, equitable access for LMICs to innovative diagnostics and treatments that are dramatically improving survival from lung cancer and COPD in wealthier countries.

Conclusion

In closing, a smoke-free and tobacco-free world is now within our collective grasp.