

FOREWORD

Some men see things as they are and ask 'Why?'.

I dream things that never were and ask, 'Why not?'.

—Robert F. Kennedy

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways to better stimulate and foster honest and open discussion about the role that harm reduction strategies might play in reducing the disease caused by the use of tobacco. I use the word 'might' because I believe that there are a number of things that must be considered and implemented if such policies are to be successful. However, I am also convinced and also caution that there may be equally important health consequences for failing to move forward in the development of such products. This paper attempts to identify and 'connect the dots' of the spectrum of issues that must be discussed and considered.

I have spent more than a quarter century working on tobacco policy issues. In the early 1980's a small group of people (and organizations) dared to step out and publicly challenge the tobacco industry and to expose them for what is now commonly accepted as decades of deceptions, cover ups, and irresponsible corporate behavior. It may seem odd to think in today's terms that many of the voluntary organizations were extremely fearful of saying anything about the industry out of fear of facing lawsuits. The efforts in those early years were the seeds of what resulted in the growth of a significant tobacco control movement not only at the federal level, but at the state, local and international level as well. These efforts continue to this day. While many of the issues remain the same, much has also changed as well and will continue to change. Change brings both new challenges and new opportunities and reminds us that without compromising our goals and objectives we need to consider new ways and opportunities to reduce the disease and death associated with tobacco use.

Reducing disease and death from tobacco use was the underlying objective as to why we took on the industry and why the need for oversight of the industry became and remains so critical. But today's changing environment necessitates engagement and a

realignment of strategies that is not easily accepted – by industry, the public health community, growers, leaf dealers, retailers and consumers of tobacco.

For many years the tobacco 'industry' was viewed as a monolithic economic giant. They spoke with one voice, they strategized together and they remained firm in their denial that their products caused significant harm. Their approach to dealing with the scientific and medical evidence about smoking was to conduct their own research in order to deny harm, while simultaneously developing low-tar and low nicotine products that consumers were made to believe were safer. Corporate accountability and transparency weren't a part of their vocabulary.

When talking about tobacco today, it is necessary to consider a spectrum of interests and issues that can influence (positively and negatively) what policy decisions are made. It is not just the public health community versus Big Tobacco anymore (and in some respects, never was). Today, decisions made about tobacco are impacted by and have far reaching effects on many constituencies and involve issues and questions that go to the heart of ethics, competition, free speech, science and technology, corporate and individual responsibilities, economics and political philosophies. Yet, we seem preoccupied with perpetuating the past instead of talking about and addressing issues of the future. Only by being willing to at least engage in a discussion to address the future can we ever hope to truly confront the industry in order to help reach our goal of reducing disease and death through the modification of tobacco and tobacco products. We must seek to expand the options available to us rather than limiting them.

The concept of harm reduction is not something that applies only to tobacco. We live in a society that is fraught with risks – in the foods and drugs (legal and illegal) we consume; in the consumption and abuse of alcohol; in the cars and manner in which we and others drive; in sexual activities including HIV and unwanted pregnancies, and in the water we drink and in the air we breathe. We can, I believe, learn from others outside of the tobacco industry and the tobacco control movement who can help us better define the parameters and methods for establishing effective and workable harm reduction efforts.

In the broader sense, tobacco harm reduction entails multiple strategies including tax increases, educational campaigns, cessation, point of purchase and age restrictions, and the elimi-

nation of environmental tobacco smoke in the workplace and in public places. No one approach is a 'silver bullet'. But harm reduction must also involve the science-based modification of products and the effective and responsible transmission of truthful information about the risks and relative risks of those products. And, it also entails and requires business entities to act more responsibly, and to be more accountable and transparent in conducting their business activities.

As we move towards what will and must inevitably be the oversight and regulation of tobacco products, something that will ironically serve the interests of public health, industry, growers and consumers, we must at the same time establish ways of engaging in legitimate debates and discussions that will not only shape policy outcomes but also the eventual regulations themselves. Today's sound bites and rhetoric must be replaced with searching for workable and effective solutions – no matter how contentious or uncomfortable that might be. Merely saying 'nothing should be done until we get FDA' or attempting to preserve the 'status quo' as some of the tobacco manufacturers have sought to do, is and can no longer be an acceptable strategy. We should be employing well established techniques for engaging in dialogue and resolving conflict.

The late Dr. John Slade, to whom this paper is dedicated, observed in an unpublished assessment of the environment in May of 2001 that:

Events are overtaking the orderly discussion of harm reduction for tobacco in the form of a range of novel product and marketing strategies that anticipate new emphasis on less toxic products. These products and marketing approaches are coming years in advance of any possible regulatory structure.

More than four years after those words were written we have progressed very little. Part of the purpose and justification of this paper is to try and initiate an orderly process and discussion of harm reduction for tobacco – one that removes the tunneled vision approach that has plagued progress.

Not too long ago, I was struck by the closing paragraph in the foreword of G. Alan Marlatt's book entitled [Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies For Managing High Risk Behaviors](#). The foreword written by David B. Abrahms, PhD, and David C. Lewis both of Brown University concludes:

Within the context of wrenching and rapid social changes that today's societies are undergoing, can the voices of reason and maturity prevail against the extreme oversimplification and polarization that have characterized so many of the largely ineffectual approaches for treating drug problems and other risk behaviors? Is our society secure and mature enough to allow for the shades of gray that reflect the reality of how to approach individual, collective and policy recommendations for the 21st century and beyond?

As I look out over the tobacco landscape, I am struck by the challenges and opportunities that we face and which exist in changing this nation's tobacco policies. Not only do the special interests in the tobacco arena rely on oversimplifications and polarization as part of their efforts but our elected officials suffer from the same syndrome. The challenge we face in our efforts to move the ball forward is consideration of **how** we establish a process by which we can avoid the 'oversimplification and polarization' and find answers that will reduce disease and death caused by the use of tobacco. Greater transparency, and engagement of the players in a neutral environment will go a long way towards breaking what has been years of efforts in consciously or unconsciously preserving the 'status quo'.

Dr. Kenneth Warner, of the University of Michigan and a longtime player in the tobacco control movement may have encapsulated the situation best with respect to harm reduction products when he said in the New York Times Sunday Magazine (June 12, 2005):

On the one hand the optimists says, we're on the verge of the era of these low-risk products. On the other, the pessimist says we're on the verge of another light cigarette fiasco. But the thing is, nobody knows. It's the most complicated thing I've ever encountered in 30 years of working on tobacco policy. It's the single most difficult issue in terms of trying to predict where it will go or where it can go'.

His assessment paints a picture of 'polarization'. I believe that somewhere, somehow there is a way through this 'complicated thing' that has to date either been ignored or which we are unwilling to acknowledge. Instead of saying 'let's do nothing until...' , we should be asking the more important question of 'how' we do it, given the realities of the times. How do we establish a civil and safe dialogue in an uncivil environment?

What road is taken depends on the willingness of the various stakeholders to embrace meaningful change, thereby finally surmounting the historic barriers to progress. For decades, tobacco and those who manufacture tobacco products – indeed everyone associated with tobacco – have suffered vilification. Given the serious risks of using tobacco and the industry’s stubborn denial that its products were seriously harmful, such vilification has been both predictable and warranted. But vilification by itself merely prolongs conflict and does little to resolve serious outstanding issues. Similarly, some of the major tobacco companies seem intent on adhering to their past ways while others are willing to change or engage in serious discussions about change. We now confront a unique opportunity to move beyond all that and onto a potentially productive path leading to a more “good faith” dialogue. For many growers, public health advocates, scientists, manufacturers, and consumers, the opportunity for meaningful change is at hand and must be seized – but it must be seized carefully.

My views and the views conveyed in this paper are the result of years of involvement and contact with a broad spectrum of interests and people in and outside tobacco who have broadened my knowledge base, challenged me to think, to explore for new opportunities and to find creative (sometimes controversial) ways of removing barriers that impede progress in achieving public health goals. I don’t have any answers. Answers will depend on the actions of people and I learned long ago that in the tobacco arena, people can often be their own worst enemies in failing to remove their blinders and see the realities (good, bad or indifferent) of a situation. I do however, have some ideas and suggestions, and I am not averse to stirring the pot up a little, especially when I see opportunities that should be discussed and seized because they could make a difference.

In some ways I see myself as a ‘messenger’ bringing some new facts, ideas and perspectives on how we might stimulate and produce a more open and transparent discussion about the future of tobacco. If there are those who wish to ‘shoot the messenger’ in order to preserve their own self-serving interests, they may do so. But my hope is that there will be those who will step forward and say “yes” we need to discuss these issues and we need to do it in an open, transparent and civil way.

The tobacco environment is in dire need of some new and visionary leadership, leadership that is not afraid of considering new ideas and ways of accomplishing the goals of reducing the disease and deaths caused by the use of tobacco.

In the end we can be accountable only to ourselves and to our abilities to focus on what we set as our real goals and objectives. **Are we in fact, ‘secure and mature enough to allow for shades of grey’ in our efforts to achieve our goals?**