



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on January 13, 2016

E-cig Study Authors Issue “Correction” After Backlash

Last month, a lab research team at the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System released the findings of its study on e-cigarettes wherein the researchers prematurely concluded that e-cigarettes are “no better than regular cigarettes,” provoking criticism from doctors and other scientists. In response to the outcry against the study, the lead scientist has issued a correction clarifying that the study did not find that e-cigarette vapor was as harmful as cigarette smoke, and that the media misrepresented the study.



The study, led by Dr. Jessica Wang-Rodriguez, found that like traditional cigarettes, e-cigarettes can lead to the development of a cancer known as head and neck squamous cell carcinoma.

According to the Daily Caller, scientists in the study extracted vapor from two popular e-cigarette brands — V2 and VaporF — and used it to “treat human cells in a petri dish.” The results revealed “the exposed cells showed several forms of damage, including DNA strand breaks. The familiar double helix that makes up DNA has two long strands of molecules that intertwine. When one or both of these strands break apart and the cellular repair process doesn’t work right, the stage is set for cancer.” Wang-Rodriguez concluded, “Based on the evidence to date, I believe they are no better than smoking regular cigarettes.”

Some news outlets seized on this study and Wang’s supposition as proof that e-cigarettes are not a better alternative to traditional cigarettes. British publications in particular ran with the story, even as Public Health England has urged smokers to switch to vaping, asserting that e-cigarettes were a safer alternative. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, produced the headline, “E-cigarettes are no safer than smoking tobacco, scientists warn,” and the *Daily Mail’s* report on the study bore a similar headline: “E-cigarettes NO better for you than smoking regular cigarettes.”

In the correction that was added to the study’s press release, Dr. Wang-Rodriguez seemed to completely forget her own claims that appeared in the study’s press release and instead solely blamed the media for misrepresenting the study’s findings:

Contrary to what was stated or implied in much of the news coverage resulting from this news release, the lab experiments did not find that e-cigarette vapor was as harmful to cells as cigarette smoke. In fact, one phase of the experiments, not addressed in the news release, found that cigarette smoke did, in fact, kill cells at a much faster rate.

However, because similar cell-damage mechanisms were observed as the result of both e-vapor and regular cigarette smoke, Dr. Wang-Rodriguez asserts, based on the evidence from the study, that e-cigarettes are not necessarily a healthier alternative to smoking regular cigarettes. As stated in the journal paper and the news release, further research is needed to better understand the actual long-term health effects of e-cigarettes in humans.



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When the press release was issued last month, the study was met with criticism by doctors who claimed that the conclusions derived from the study were far too ambitious.

Dr. Michael Siegel, a professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences at Boston University School of Public Health, told the Daily Caller that the study in fact confirms previous findings that damage caused by e-cigarette vapor to epithelial cell lines in culture is significantly lower than that caused by tobacco smoke. "However, it cannot be concluded from this cell culture that e-cigarette vapor actually has toxic or carcinogenic effects in humans who use these products," Dr. Siegel added.

Siegel asserts that the study's conclusion that e-cigarettes are no less harmful than traditional cigarettes is "baseless" and actually quite threatening to public health, as it "undermines decades of public education about the severe hazards of cigarette smoking."

Dr. Wang-Rodriguez admitted in the study that the cells in the lab were "not completely comparable to cells within a living person," nor did the team attempt to "mimic the actual dose of vapor than an e-cigarette user would get."

But that did not prevent her from reaching her own conclusion.

Professor Kevin Fenton, director of health and wellbeing at [Public Health England](#), asserts that the best thing for smokers to do is to quit smoking completely. However, for smokers who are too addicted to attempt quitting "cold turkey," e-cigarettes, while not entirely risk-free, remain a much better alternative to smoking. "E-cigarettes are not completely risk free but when compared to smoking, evidence shows they carry just a fraction of the harm," he said.

And like Siegel, Fenton asserts it is doing a disservice to the public to claim that traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes share the same health risks, as that type of misinformation is likely to keep smokers from kicking their habit.

"The problem is people increasingly think [e-cigarettes] are at least as harmful and this may be keeping millions of smokers from quitting," he states.

E-cigarettes are believed to be a valuable tool in helping smokers to quit smoking. California Polytechnic State University professor of economics Michael Marlow asserts, "E-cigarettes have become the greatest source of 'creative destruction' that we've seen against the tobacco industry."



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