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E-cigarettes: from nicotine to cannabinoids, the French situation

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The promotion of vaping to reduce tobacco-related harms is debated worldwide. E-cigarettes could play a role in public health if they are shown to be effective and safe cessation aids. In January 2018, two comments illustrated the substantial controversy regarding e-cigarettes in the UK^{1,2}. Despite this debate, vaping has become the most popular cessation aid in the UK; the British situation is therefore being carefully watched by public health bodies around the world.

By contrast, things are moving more slowly in France in terms of attitudes towards e-cigarettes. In 2016, 34.5% of French people aged 15-75 smoked tobacco, while only 3.3% used e-cigarettes³. In February 2016, the French High Council for Public Health stated that vaping was “a tool for reducing the risks of smoking” and “a smoking cessation aid for smokers”⁴. However, it also stated that e-cigarettes “may act as a way to start smoking” and “run a risk of renormalising tobacco consumption”⁴. In May 2017, the French National Cancer Institute concluded that “health risks are expected to be reduced for tobacco smokers who switch to e-cigarettes”. However, the health effects of prolonged use of e-cigarettes are not yet known, which is why their use is discouraged among non-smokers. In May 2017 the French National Public Health agency claimed that a high proportion of French vapers were either current smokers (48.0% daily, 41.2% occasionally) or former smokers (10.8%)³, with a tendency to quit tobacco smoking or to reduce the number of cigarettes they smoked every day by at least half⁵.

While controversy about the role of vaping in smoking cessation continues to rage, a new debate is growing around e-cigarettes and cannabinoids. Recently, many French media outlets have published content denouncing the vaping of cannabis derivatives. In November 2017, “Le Parisien” newspaper headlined: “Cannabis: the worrying success of the electronic joint” [<http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/cannabis-l-inquietant-succes-du-joint-electronique-28-11-2017-7419270.php>]. This trend deserves further exploration. First, e-cigarettes are increasingly being used as a new device for inhaling Δ^9 -tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the primary psychoactive drug of the cannabis plant. In France the sale, transport and production of THC-containing products for personal use remains prohibited⁶. Concomitantly, cannabidiol (CBD) vaping is becoming more common in France in the second half of 2017, with anecdotal reports that sales of CBD e-liquid have been increasing. As CBD is considered non-psychoactive, pure CBD-based e-liquids of synthetic origin, as well as CBD products with THC content lower than 0.2%, are legal in France⁶.

Cannabinoids are increasingly used in France for recreational purposes (*e.g.* smoked cannabis or CBD vaping) and for medical applications (*e.g.* to relieve some symptoms of multiple sclerosis). Based on lessons learned from the controversy surrounding nicotine vaping, the risks and benefits of cannabinoid vaping should be discussed. Even if e-cigarettes can be considered as a promising harm reduction strategy of smoked cannabis, as for nicotine vaping the potential issues are: exposure to airborne toxicants, limited evidence to support the efficacy in smoking cessation, and a possible gateway to start smoking. There is an urgent need for a scientific debate to inform political and regulatory decisions, and the sale of cannabinoid-based e-liquids, health warnings and better consumer information.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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