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TEPAV Tobacco Control Policy Research Team[1]

POLICY NOTE

WHAT A NAME SUGGESTS: TOBACCO PRODUCTS[2]

When deliberating on a subject, we must first understand very well what the concepts and terms that form the basis of the subject mean. While the subject in question is being discussed, everyone involved in the discussion needs to know what the terms used mean. Especially if a subject is being discussed by the scientists, if scientific studies are being carried out on that subject and some policies are established depending on the results of these studies, it becomes even more important to know what these terms mean.

Today, everyone knows more or less what the units of measurement we use, for example, the meter, the kilogram, mean. “One kilogram” means the same mass for all of us today. This is because in the past some people dealt with this issue and struggled to come up with a scientific definition for this measure. As a result of those efforts, today we can easily use this unit for daily shopping in the market; we don't worry about being misunderstood.

Unfortunately, the concepts used in some fields are not concepts that are relatively easy to standardize like the units of measurement of the metric system. Especially in areas where innovation and change are abundant, change sometimes happens so fast that the definition of concepts that shape our thoughts and discussions, the establishment and adoption of these definitions cannot keep up with this speed. As such, the way in which the events stick in our minds differs markedly between the individuals. This difference can be reflected in our thoughts, our discourse, the decisions we make, and if we think more broadly, in the policies implemented by the countries.

[1] This note was prepared by the TEPAV Tobacco Control Policy Research Team.
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Today, it is known that tobacco products have a wide use and these products cause the death of more than 7 million people every year. There are different types of tobacco products (such as cigarettes, rolled cigarettes, cigars, cigarillos, bidi). Although the more popular product types vary depending on the geographical region and culture, it is known that the majority of deaths are due to smoking. In addition to tobacco products, there are also products that do not contain tobacco but may contain nicotine, among which electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and similar vaping products are the ones we hear about the most frequently. We see that these products are used by those who want to quit or reduce smoking for the purpose of staying away from smoking. There are also products that contain tobacco, but are used only by heating, without burning as in a cigarette. In short, we see that the products are spread over a wide range and are varied. With the emergence of these products, it became more difficult to understand the tobacco products market, to evaluate the damage of the products and to interpret the developments. When it comes to tobacco products, we do not all understand the same thing anymore.

With the rapid evolution of tobacco and nicotine-containing products and vaping products, the need for more work on their identification and denomination has emerged. When we look at the names used by well-known organizations that are related to the subject, we encounter an interesting situation. For example, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States (US) classifies e-cigarettes as a tobacco product. However, the fact that nicotine is the only tobacco constituent in e-cigarettes and that nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products with nicotine are regulated as medicinal products by the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER) and are not classified as tobacco products represents a contradictory situation. Also, given that many e-cigarettes do not contain nicotine or any other tobacco constituent, or even any psychoactive drug, it becomes difficult to explain why such vaping products are called tobacco products.

Similarly, we happen to see that the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies products that do not contain tobacco constituents as tobacco products. We see that Bloomberg Philanthropies, a major supporter of tobacco control research, classifies e-cigarettes as flavored tobacco products.

A short time ago, an article[3] by Sharon Cox and colleagues was published in the scientific journal titled "Addiction". Researchers who carried out the study addressed tobacco and nicotine-containing products and vaping devices and reflected upon how these products should be grouped and what the main product groups should be; in other words, they worked on developing an ontology in this field.

In this study, which was sponsored by Cancer Research United Kingdom, the authors set out to develop an e-cigarette ontology (E-CigO) that included all e-cigarette-related products (tobacco and nicotine-containing products and vaping devices). The work started in 2019 by organizing webinars and workshops with large groups of participants. In these meetings that hosted researchers on nicotine and tobacco from inside and outside the academia and relevant experts (experts in policy, implementation, research methods, public health, epidemiology, basic science and toxicology), approximately 700 terms that might be related to e-cigarettes were examined and these terms were analyzed. It was discussed whether these terms would be included in the ontology, and if so, where and with which label and definition they would be

[3] "Toward an ontology of tobacco, nicotine and vaping products", ADDICTION, August 15, 2022. Authors: Sharon Cox, Robert West, Caitlin Notley, Kirstie Soar, Janna Hastings. Open access: https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16010

included. The main points that were thought to cause confusion were evaluated. After an extensive and detailed study, the research team reached a consensus on the labels to be used to refer to the entities. The grouping/labeling information of the entities in the previously developed ontologies (such as AddicO) was transferred to E-CigO. Thus, a wide variety of many different products could be classified in a systematic manner and the relationships between the products could be revealed.

The ontology created by the authors can broadly be shown in the following tables.

General classes of tobacco and nicotine-containing products and vaping products:	Category at the upper level (more general and inclusive)
Tobacco	*Commodity*
Tobacco-containing product	*Product*
Nicotine-containing product	*Product*
Vaping device	*Product*
Electronic vaping device	*Vaping device*
Combustible tobacco-containing product	*Tobacco-containing product*
Heated tobacco product	*Tobacco-containing product*
Smokeless tobacco-containing product	*Tobacco-containing product*

Types of tobacco-containing products:	Category at the upper level (more general and inclusive)
Cigar	*Combustible tobacco-containing product*
Cigarette	*Combustible tobacco-containing product*
Bidi	*Combustible tobacco-containing product*
Oral tobacco-containing product	*Smokeless tobacco-containing product*
Chewing tobacco product	*Oral tobacco-containing product*
Nasal snuff	*Smokeless tobacco-containing product*
Oral snuff	*Oral tobacco-containing product*
Cigarillo	*Cigar*
Manufactured cigarette	*Cigarette*
Hand-rolled cigarette	*Cigarette*

Types of nicotine-containing products:	Category at the upper level (more general and inclusive)
Oral nicotine-containing product	*Nicotine-containing product*
Nasal nicotine-containing product	*Nicotine-containing product*
Inhaled nicotine-containing product	*Nicotine-containing product*
Transdermal nicotine-containing product	*Nicotine-containing product*

Types of e-cigarettes:	Category at the upper level (more general and inclusive)
E-cigarette	*Electronic vaping device*
Nicotine-containing e-cigarette	*E-cigarette*
E-cigarette open system	*E-cigarette*
E-cigarette pod device	*E-cigarette*
E-cigarette closed system	*E-cigarette*

As can be clearly seen, tobacco-containing products and nicotine-containing products are addressed separately. It is stated that tobacco products often, though not always, contain nicotine and that most of the nicotine products do not contain tobacco. In addition, e-cigarette types are included in a separate classification from other product types, namely tobacco-containing products and nicotine-containing products.

Another remarkable point is that, although this term is used in regulation-related documents, a category under the name of “tobacco products” is not included in the classification due to the uncertainties and confusion created by the term. The authors recommended that this term not be used in scientific studies unless the study was specifically concerned with the reference of the term in regulations.

We can easily see that the names given to products in this market directly affect the conduct and interpretation of scientific research. Confusion about how the products are named can easily lead to misunderstandings and disagreements about the interpretation of data. For example, some studies that address e-cigarette as a tobacco product and conclude that tobacco use has become more popular among the youth in the US, or some evaluations related to tobacco use that focus on cigarettes but exclude cigarillos, which are very similar to cigarettes in terms of addiction and harm, reveal once again the significance of how the products are classified.

Another example of how confusing the terms we use can be is the term “e-cigarette or vaping product use associated lung injury- EVALI”. The term was coined by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to describe a clinical condition involving acute lung injury resulting from the use of certain types of vaping devices. Thus, the e-cigarette was established within the term EVALI and was directly associated with the aforementioned clinical picture. In the following statements, information was shared that the clinical situation was not related to the use of e-cigarettes alone, but to the use of liquids containing

tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and mixed with vitamin E acetate. However, with the severity of the EVALI table and the perception created by the term EVALI, the public began to confuse the use of THC with the use of e-cigarettes, and this confusion naturally led to the establishment of an opinion that e-cigarettes and similar vaping products are very harmful and even lethal.

If scientists can make a clear classification of products and be clear about concepts, then the press releases and other forms of scientific communication with the media and the public can also be clear. It is evident that an ontology prepared on this subject will contribute positively to both the scientific presentation of the opinions on the types of different products and their harms, thus the correct formation of the perception in the society and the protection and improvement of public health.