

# What is new? Evolving strategies and the endgame for the industry

Dr Douglas Bettcher, Senior Advisor on NCDs to the Director General, World Health Organization, Geneva

World No Tobacco Day



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**\* Disclaimer:** Views expressed in this presentation are mine alone and do not necessarily represent the views, decisions or policies of the WHO.

# "Endgame" is a misnomer for the tobacco industry strategies

Tobacco industry strategies are always pursuing the same aim: to lobby policymakers, to get a seat at the table and to maximise their profits

The tobacco industry only wants us to play their game according to their own rules



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**Hijacking the political & legislative process**



**Manipulating public opinion to gain a façade of respectability**



**Fabricating support through front groups**

# Old Wine, New Bottles: Industry Interference Takes many Forms



**Exaggerating its own economic importance**



**Intimidating governments with litigation or the threat of litigation**



**Discrediting & distorting science**



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# “Harm Reduction”: Rebranding of the Old Tobacco Industry Playbook for Addicting a New Generation



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**Tobacco industry is still using its old tactics including aggressive public relations and marketing campaigns, even some targeted to children and youth through paid influencers, as well as attempts to discredit WHO and other public health regulators**

**Industry pursues these scare and redemption tactics all the while still pushing cigarettes and marketing ENDS as complementary with tobacco products**





# The tobacco industry is a mutating virus

Tobacco industry strategies are a mutating virus always evolving to exploit weaknesses in the public health community



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# The Harm Reduction Trojan Horse





# A Trojan Horse

Industry actors are trying to position themselves as leaders in tobacco cessation.

The tobacco industry, which is reaping the lion share of its profit from smoked tobacco products, is trying to increase profits from existing customers and hook a new generation on nicotine while repositioning themselves as good actors.



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**"... tobacco companies have been aggressively marketing new products – like e-cigarettes and heated-tobacco products ... Their goal is simple: to hook another generation on nicotine."** Michael R. Bloomberg  
WHO Global Ambassador for NCDs and injuries



Although often marketed as less harmful alternatives to tobacco, they pose risks to health:

- Generate toxic substances
- Associated with asthma and COPD
- Can affect brain development
- Exposure to their emissions may pose risks to bystanders
- ENDS are often used as complements to, and not substitutes for, conventional cigarettes

## Urgent action needed to protect children and prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes

14 December 2023 | News release | Reading time: 3 min (692 words)

[العربية](#)[中文](#)[Français](#)[Русский](#)[Español](#)

Urgent action is needed to control e-cigarettes to protect children, as well as non-smokers and minimize health harms to the population. E-cigarettes as consumer products are not shown to be effective for quitting tobacco use at the population level. Instead, alarming evidence has emerged on adverse population health effects.

E-cigarettes have been allowed on the open market and aggressively marketed to young people. Thirty-four countries ban the sale of e-cigarettes, 88 countries have no minimum age at which e-cigarettes can be bought and 74 countries have no regulations in place for these harmful products.

"Kids are being recruited and trapped at an early age to use e-cigarettes and may get hooked to nicotine," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "I urge countries to implement strict measures to prevent uptake to protect their citizens, especially their children and young people."

E-cigarettes with nicotine are highly addictive and are harmful to health. Whilst long-term health effects are not fully understood, it has been established that they generate toxic substances, some of which are known to cause cancer and some that increase the risk of heart and lung disorders. Use of e-cigarettes can also affect brain development and lead to learning disorders for young people. Fetal exposure to e-cigarettes can adversely affect the development of the fetus in pregnant women. Exposure to emissions from e-cigarettes also poses risks to bystanders.

"E-cigarettes target children through social media and influencers, with at least 16 000 flavours. Some of these products use cartoon characters and have sleek designs, which appeal to the younger generation. There is an alarming increase in the use of e-cigarettes among children and young people with rates exceeding adult use in many countries," Dr Ruediger Krech, WHO Director for Health Promotion.

Children 13–15-years old are using e-cigarettes at rates higher than adults in all WHO regions. In Canada, the rates of e-cigarette use among 16–19-year-olds has doubled between 2017–2022, and in England (the United Kingdom) the number of young users has tripled in the past three years.



# Repeating the Past: Youth Initiation by Design

“The minute you saw cotton candy flavors – come on, ... Everything that could have been done should have been done to get them off the market.” – Dr. Thomas R. Frieden

New products, old playbook: The tobacco industry's products kills eight million of its own customers each year—to remain in business they need to manipulate a new generation into lifelong addiction and prevent or undermine any regulations that stand in their way



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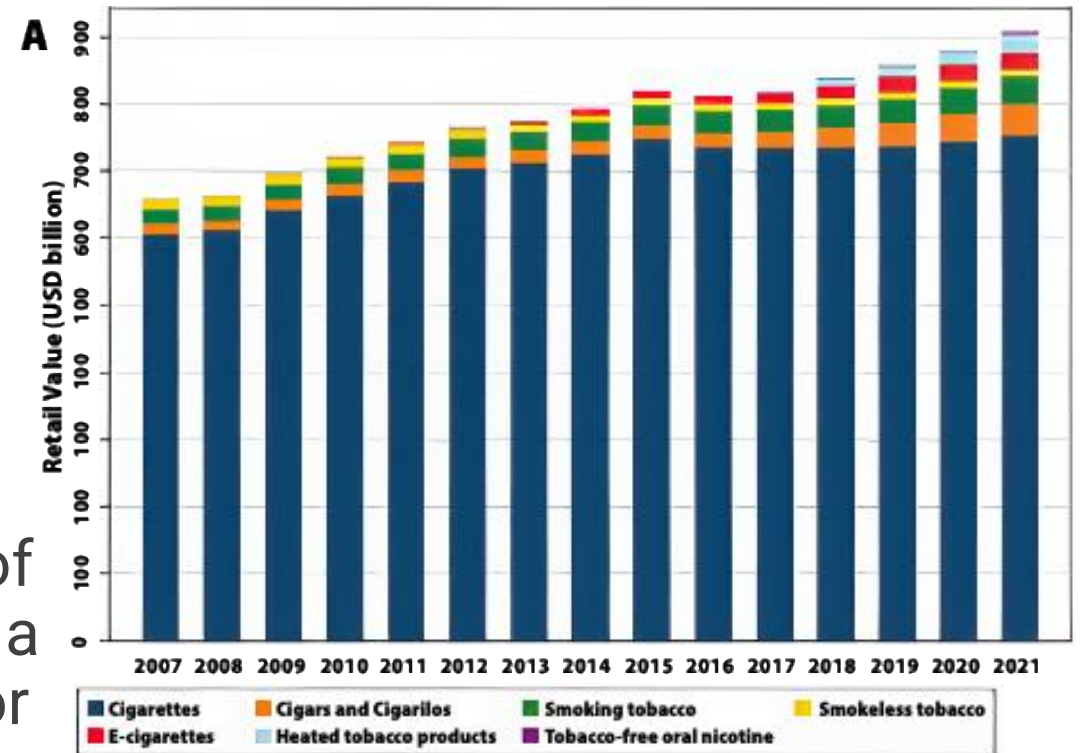
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# New Products are High-Margin: This Does Not Mean they Replace Cigarettes

PMI claimed in 2025 that the new areas of their business (which includes harmful tobacco products, like Snus and Heated Tobacco Products) make up 40% of their revenues and 42% of their profits

The focus by PMI, BAT and other industry actors on increasing “revenue” and “market share” ignores the reality that the majority of sales by retail value both absolutely and as a proportion of the nicotine market are still for cigarettes

Trends in global market size and market share of the seven types of tobacco or nicotine products, for 97 countries, 2007–2021 (Liu and Filippidis, 2024)



The global market size for each product type was calculated as the sum of retail value across the 97 countries  
The global market share for each product type was calculated as the proportion of the sum of a product's retail value across the 97 countries





# The Tobacco Industry is Making a Comeback from Denormalization and Defeat: The Redemption Narrative is Improving on its Tried-and-True Playbook of Manipulation

The “Harm Reduction” Marketing Rhetoric is Part of a Broader Industry Redemption Narrative and Form of Interference that Goes Beyond a Certain Class of Products

New products are a part of a broader wave of fake “redemption” rhetoric and empty gestures

Reinvents existing tactics for hijacking politics, public opinion, and science while weaponizing innovation and front-groups



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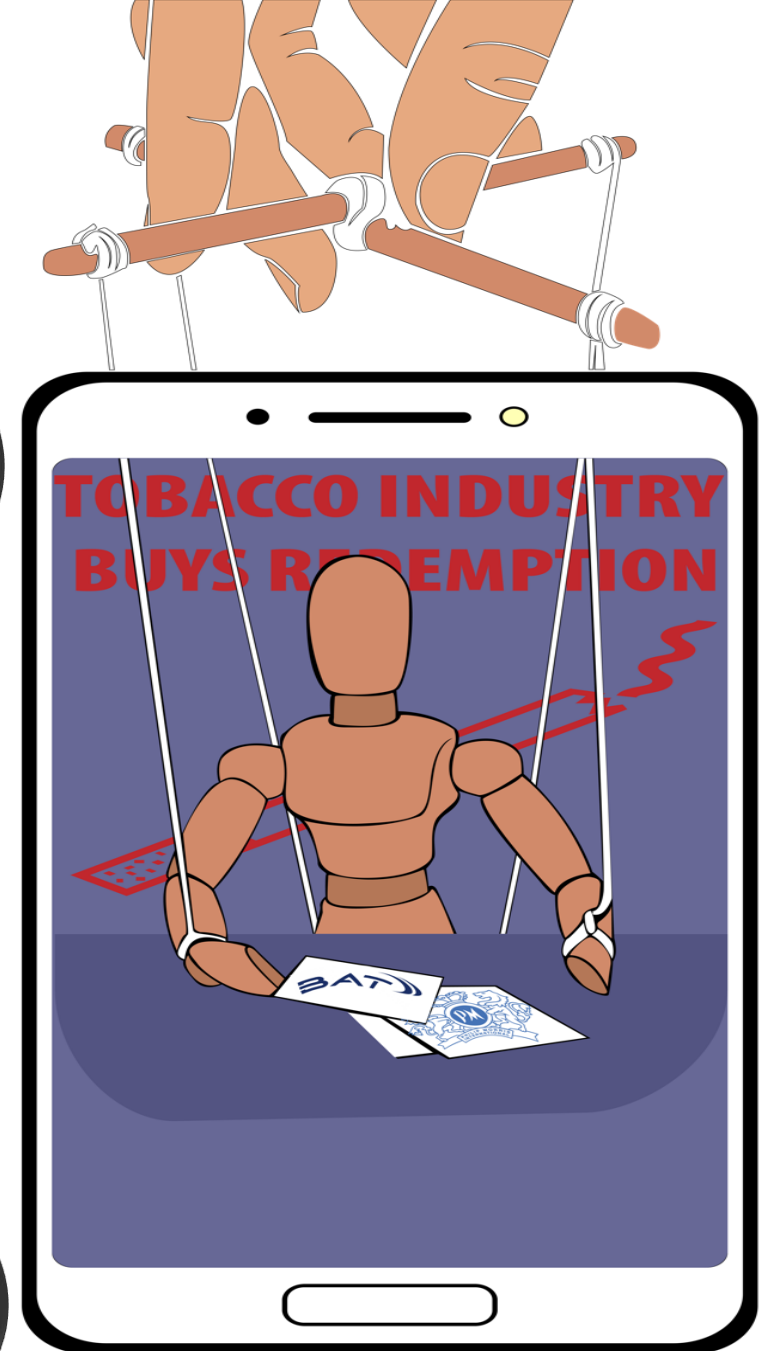
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# Still Born Harm Reduction: The Tobacco Industry is Killing the Potential of Electronic Nicotine Dispensing Systems for Harm Reduction

The tobacco and related industries have been trying new strategies in response to stronger regulatory measures in many countries:

- Aggressive expansion into and within new and growing markets in the Global South
- Maximising profits and use within mature declining markets through pricing and other strategies

The marketing and public relations strategy of “harm reduction” is just one more tactic



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# Redemption Narrative Example: Health Tech and Vaccine Investments

BAT: “This is part of our ongoing commitment to innovation and science, which are fundamental to our business. As a company committed to building A Better Tomorrow, we are proud to play our part in the global fight against this virus.”

“We are very excited about the critical role Vectura will play in our Beyond Nicotine strategy...”  
Jacek Olczak, PMI CEO



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## News Release

BAT progresses COVID-19 candidate vaccine into Phase I human clinical trials

16 December 2020

- Investigational New Drug application approved by the FDA for COVID-19 candidate vaccine, allowing BAT to progress into a Phase I clinical trial in adult volunteers
- Vaccine candidate created using innovative plant-based technology
- Vaccines manufactured using BAT's vaccine platform have the potential to be stable at room temperature which could offer significant advantages
- Study demonstrates BAT's commitment to delivering science and innovation that build *A Better Tomorrow*



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A worker inspects vaccine-containing tobacco plants at Medicago greenhouse in Quebec City.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHIEU BELANGER, REUTERS

SCIENCE | CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

**Your next vaccine could be grown in a tobacco plant**



**Medicago develops a plant-based vaccine for Coronavirus**

19 Mar 2020 • 3 min read





Reinventing Public Health to Meet the Challenge



# A Weapon of Division

“The authors’ silence on the industry is remarkable; we do not trust the tobacco industry, despite Philip Morris International’s protestation of a new direction, which is an echo of past false promises. ... An unneeded schism and polarization are antithetical to what should be happening now..”

Samet and Barrington-Trimis  
(APJH 2021)



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## E-Cigarettes and Harm Reduction: An Artificial Controversy Instead of Evidence and a Well-Framed Decision Context

Jonathan M. Samet, MD, MS, and Jessica Barrington-Trimis, PhD

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jonathan M. Samet is with the Colorado School of Public Health, Aurora. Jessica Barrington-Trimis is with the Department of Population and Public Health Sciences, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

In this issue of *AJPH*, a distinguished group of tobacco control researchers and practitioners call for a more balanced look at e-cigarettes for reducing the enormous and persistent burden of smoking-caused morbidity and premature mortality—a worthy goal. The article is built around the artifice of a controversy between “fervent opponents” of harm reduction who emphasize risk to young people and “enthusiastic supporters” who want to facilitate smoking cessation and reduce harm with e-cigarettes. This “controversy” exists because we lack evidence on the long-term consequences of policies that

underlie decision making on the place of e-cigarettes in the tobacco marketplace. The key principle is captured in the public health impact standard for modified risk products of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act. Such products must:

- (1) significantly reduce harm and the risk of tobacco-related disease to individual tobacco users; and (2) benefit the health of the population as a whole taking into account both users of tobacco products and persons who do not currently use tobacco products.<sup>1</sup> (p123)

morbidity and mortality while remaining nicotine addicted. If there are harms, they largely fall on youths and young adults, who are at risk for becoming addicted to nicotine across their lifetimes and sustaining the inevitable consequential adverse health effects. This is an intergenerational trade-off: possible immediate health benefits for older persons versus longer term and quite uncertain health risks for younger individuals.

The authors’ review leads them to conclude that e-cigarettes’ risk trade-off benefits population health overall. We do not agree that the evidence presented is sufficient to support their conclusion. Their evidence comes from a selective and opaque review process that does not meet standards for systematic review or for evidence integration, as in the US Surgeon General reports on smoking and health.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the risks of nicotine (and e-cigarettes specifically) for youths are minimized in the face of much (uncited) longitudinal evidence of its dangers (e.g., increase in the frequency and intensity of cigarette smoking, risk of nicotine dependence).<sup>3</sup> Nicotine is a known addictive chemical; disposable and pod-based products that administer nicotine in very high concentrations with little adverse sensory effect are addicting

## Back to Basics: Article 5.3

WHO FCTC: Article 5.3: Parties shall protect tobacco control policies from the tobacco industry

WHO FCTC COP Guidelines to Article 5.3: There is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests



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Harm reduction as framed and marketed by the tobacco and related industries, as well as their proxies, front-groups and allies, is based on a misunderstanding of Article 1 of the WHO FCTC

Article 1's recognition of harm reduction is premised on a framing around population level effects and an overall reduction in tobacco use

To be properly understood, Article 1 must also be read in conjunction with Article 5.2(a), focusing on regulation for reducing nicotine addiction, and Article 5.3 and the COP Guidelines to it

Principle 1: There is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests.



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# What Tobacco Harm Reduction Governance Should Be

Overseen by public agencies with the sole interest of reducing harm.

Based on products and availability modalities subject to rigorous independent scientific review.

First and foremost oriented prevention of youth and never user addiction.

Does not give up on providing real cessation options to smokers.

Complementary to rather than conflicting with mainstream tobacco control.



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# The Future: Tackling Commercially Determined Risk Factors as Infodemics

NCDs are an area in which study, monitoring and response to misinformation has been neglected

The amount of misinformation on NCDs has also increased during COVID-19

The experience of countering the COVID-19 infodemic provides an adaptable model and appropriate tools for managing and fighting the NCDs infodemic

## Tackling misinformation on NCDs



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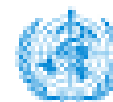
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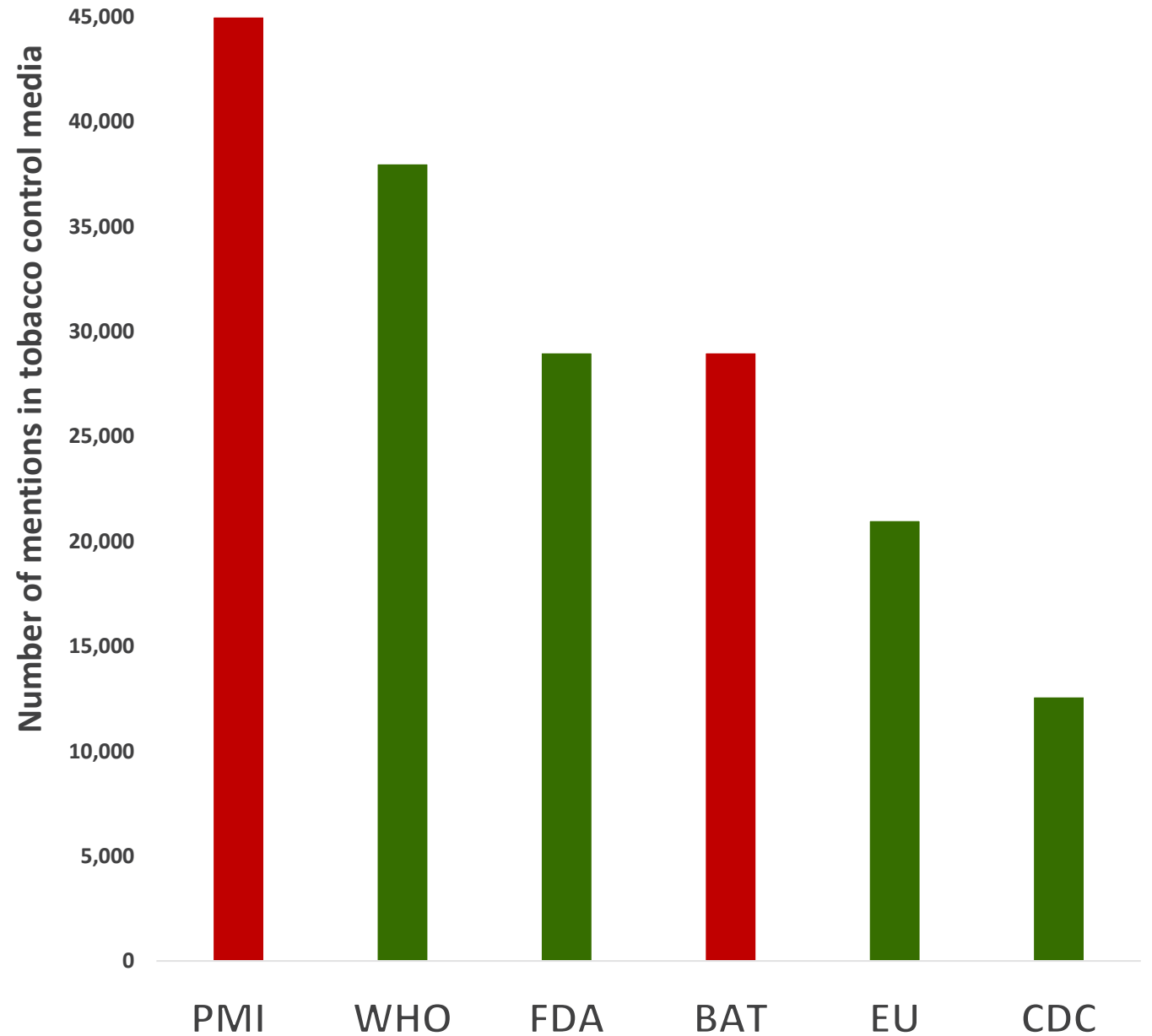


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# There is Hope

The tobacco industry can use its financial muscle to buy influence but despite massively outspending public health it is not entirely dominating the communications war



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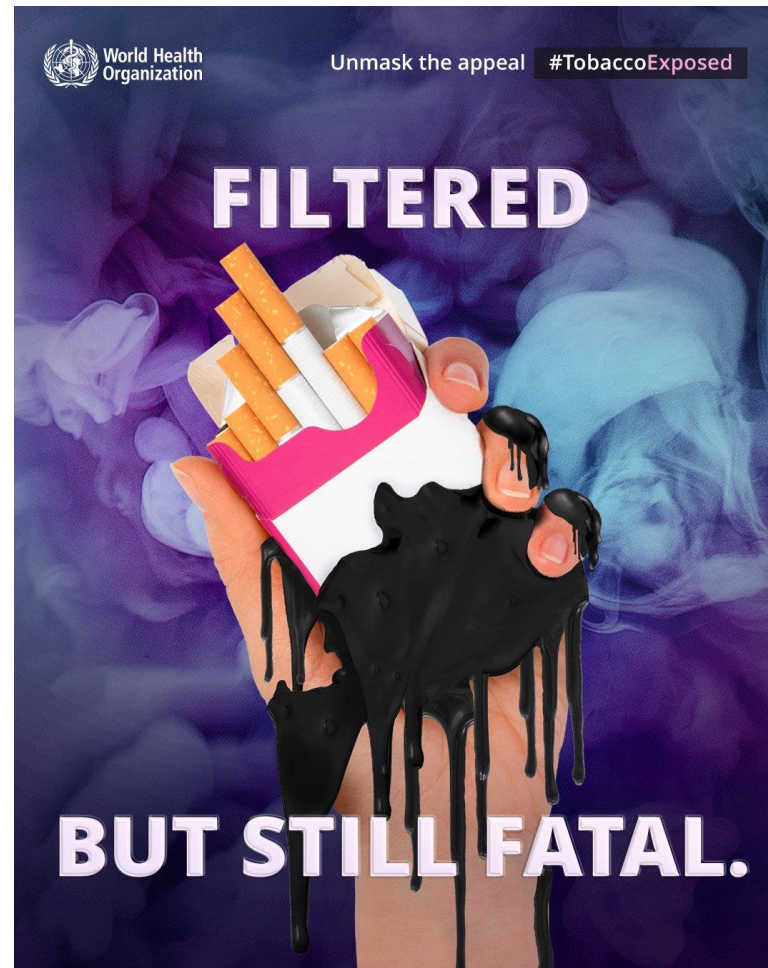


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# World No Tobacco Day 2025: Unmasking the appeal—Exposing Industry Tactics on Tobacco and Nicotine Products



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# Thank you!



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