

Carl Phillips

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I am dismayed to see that the West Virginia media is uncritically accepting anti-smokeless-tobacco propaganda from anti-tobacco groups that are posing as public health advocates. Contrary to what most people believe, the health risk of using smokeless tobacco (ST), a category which includes snus (the subject of the recent outpouring of media) as well as traditional snuff dipping and chewing tobacco, is quite minimal. Extensive research shows that the risk from using ST is about 1% of the risk from smoking. The health risks are similar to those from drinking coffee or eating french fries.

As someone of Appalachian heritage (both of my parents grew up in West Virginia) and as a public health researcher and educator, I am ever disheartened to see the toll that smoking takes on the people of Appalachia. This is especially tragic because the area has a history of smokeless tobacco use, which many smokers have found an acceptable alternative to their previously much more harmful habit. In Sweden, another community with an ST tradition, smoking has largely been replaced by ST use, resulting in the lowest levels of tobacco-caused disease in the Western world. West Virginia could achieve that too. But the efforts by anti-tobacco activists in West Virginia to convince smokers that ST is much riskier than it really is will only serve to keep people from learning about the tremendous benefits of switching. Anyone who is really concerned about the health of the community should embrace the potential of ST; only those who merely want to impose their own anti-tobacco value system on their neighbors would oppose it.

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