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Is It Safe to Vape? Analyzing Online Forums Discussing E-Cigarette Use during Pregnancy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Electronic cigarette (e-cigarette) use, or vaping, is increasing against a backdrop of declining smoking rates. E-cigarettes contain fewer toxicants than cigarettes, but their appearance and mode of use has the potential to satisfy the habitual aspects of smoking. To date, we know little about lay perceptions of the safety of using e-cigarettes in pregnancy.

Methods: We conducted a thematic discourse analysis of 13 online discussion forum threads that discussed e-cigarette use during pregnancy. We focused on the major discursive strategies that forum posters used to debate the “safety” of e-cigarette use during pregnancy.

Results: We identified three distinct ways in which forum posters debated the safety of using e-cigarettes during pregnancy: 1) quitting (nicotine) cold turkey is unsafe, 2) vaping is the lesser of two evils, and 3) vaping is not worth the risk.

Conclusions: Discussions about the “safety” of e-cigarettes drew on the premise that 1) immediate cessation of nicotine was potentially harmful and unsafe, 2) e-cigarettes were a harm reduction tool, or 3) “vaping” could be dangerous and should be avoided. Although these arguments are not necessarily specific to pregnancy (beside mentions of fetal-specific risks), this analysis points to the need to educate and support women about harm reduction options.

Implications: Health professionals should be aware that some women may be currently using or considering using e-cigarettes in an effort to quit or reduce smoking. It is important health that professionals are equipped to educate women with accurate up-to-date and balanced information about the risks and benefits of e-cigarette use during pregnancy.

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Cigarette smoking is one of the most preventable causes of adverse pregnancy outcomes. Although pregnancy is an important time to quit smoking, a substantial minority of women smoke during pregnancy: 13.5% in Australia ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Li, Zeki, Hilder, & Sullivan, 2012](#)), 12% in the UK ([Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2012](#)), 15% in Canada ([Al-Sahab, Saqib, Hauser & Tamim, 2010](#)), and 8% in the United States ([Curtin & Matthews, 2016](#)). Given the addictive nature of nicotine ([U.S. Surgeon General, 1988](#)), pregnant women

often go to great lengths to reduce their smoking either as a method of quitting or harm reduction ([Graham, Flemming, Fox, Heirs, & Sowden, 2014](#)).

Findings from qualitative research suggest that smokers view their addiction as more than simply the need for nicotine. In particular, smokers value the habit of smoking and only see certain cigarettes as satisfying their addiction ([Bancroft, Wiltshire, Parry, & Amos, 2003](#); [Wigginton, Morphett, & Gartner, under review](#)). Some smokers discuss *handling the cigarettes* as part of their addiction ([O'Loughlin, Kishchuk, DiFranza, Tremblay, & Paradis, 2002](#)), whereas others emphasize the *hand-to-mouth gesture* ([Bowker et al., 2015](#); [Wigginton, Morphett, & Gartner, under review](#)).

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) have the potential to satisfy both the habitual aspects of smoking and nicotine addiction while delivering fewer toxicants ([Farsalinos & Polosa, 2014](#)). Although e-cigarettes may assist pregnant women to quit smoking, substantial controversy exists regarding their

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promotion and use (Bell & Keane, 2012; Polosa, Rodu, Caponnetto, Maglia, & Raciti, 2013). On one hand, there is concern about their efficacy as cessation aids, the long-term health effects, and the possible renormalization of smoking through the widespread use of these products (Fairchild, Bayer, & Colgrove, 2014). At the same time, there are debates about the ethics of preventing addicted smokers access to a less harmful (nicotine) product (Hall, Gartner, & Forlini, 2015).

The regulation of e-cigarettes varies markedly between countries. For instance, in Australia, the sale, possession, and use of nicotine e-cigarettes without a prescription is generally illegal (Douglas, Hall, & Gartner, 2015), whereas these products have been treated as general consumer products in the United States and UK (Gartner & Hall, 2015). Although there are regulatory differences between countries, e-cigarette use is widespread, particularly in countries with fewer restrictions. Data from 2010 and 2011 (Adkison et al., 2013) involving 5,939 current and former smokers from Australia, Canada, the United States, and the UK indicated that 46.6% of participants were aware of e-cigarettes, 7.6% had tried them, and 3% were current users, with no differences across countries. More recent data (2010–2013) from this same study (Yong et al., 2015) reported that e-cigarette awareness had increased in Australia and the UK, but use was more common in the UK (18%) than in Australia (6%).

Data on e-cigarette use during pregnancy are limited. A survey conducted in the United States with 316 pregnant women reported that 13% of women had ever used an e-cigarette and only two women were using e-cigarettes daily; ever-users were typically older and current smokers (Mark, Farquhar, Chisolm, Coleman-Cowger, & Terplan, 2015). Evidence regarding the efficacy of e-cigarettes as a cessation device for pregnant women is absent, because trials typically exclude pregnant women (Bryce & Robson, 2015). We also know little about public perceptions of e-cigarette use by pregnant women.

To date, three small-scale studies have examined lay perceptions of the safety of e-cigarette use during pregnancy (Baeza-Loya et al., 2014; Fallin, Miller, Assef, & Ashford, 2016; Kahr et al., 2015; Mark et al., 2015). These studies have found that participants (many of whom were pregnant) viewed e-cigarette use during pregnancy as less harmful than smoking. However, a recent interview study (Bowker et al., 2015) with 14 British women who tried using nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) during pregnancy found most were reluctant to use e-cigarettes because of safety concerns.

Many e-cigarettes are not labelled with any warnings against use in pregnancy. Although there is ongoing debate about the safety of e-cigarettes for pregnant women (Buonocore, Marques Gomes, Nabhani-Gebara, Barton, & Calabrese, 2016), relatively little is known about lay perceptions of e-cigarette use (also known as “vaping”) and the perceived safety during pregnancy.

We examined online forum conversations that discussed the safety of vaping during pregnancy. Increasingly, health discussions and information seeking take place online (Fox & Duggan, 2013). Online forums—in which people view, post, and respond to (topic) threads within a virtual community—provide a unique opportunity for researchers to access naturalistic data on controversial and sensitive topics without being influenced by the researchers' agenda (Jowett, 2015). Accordingly, online forums offer a new medium to explore public discussions about smoking cessation and harm reduction (e.g., Burri, Baujard, & Etter, 2006).

We analyzed 13 online forums discussing vaping during pregnancy, with an interest in how forum posters debated the

safety of e-cigarette use during pregnancy. Without attempting to generalize these findings, we seek to provide an exploratory analysis of online forums targeting an emerging, yet under-researched, health issue.

Methods

Data Collection

The first author conducted a search via Google (October 8, 2015) using the key terms “vaping during pregnancy” that revealed 207,000 results. Forums were subject to analysis if they included discussions about e-cigarette use during pregnancy. There were no restrictions regarding the type of forum analyzed (e.g., pregnancy, parenting, smoking, and e-cigarette forums). However, news articles, blogs, health information websites, promotional or product websites, and government websites were excluded from the analysis. We also excluded forum threads that were not specific to e-cigarette use during pregnancy and those that discussed vaping marijuana during pregnancy. Beyond the sixth page of Google, the search results lacked relevance and were not included in this analysis. The first author identified and selected 13 forum threads that met the inclusion criteria for analysis (Table 1).

Most of the 13 forums were e-cigarette or pregnancy forums. One online forum included comments from members in response to an editorial written by a panel of health writers about the safety of e-cigarettes during pregnancy; however, only the comments provided by forum members were analyzed. Two forum threads were started by e-cigarette vendors asking whether they should sell to pregnant women. Forums varied in terms of activity: one forum had closed shortly after opening, some were open but inactive, and others were still open and active at the time of analysis.

Although some forums were based in Australia, the UK, or the United States, it was not possible to identify the host country for other websites (Table 1). Our analysis was not restricted to specific countries because we were interested in representing views across different regulatory contexts. Additionally, a person who writes a comment on the forum (a “poster”) does not have to be living in a particular country to join, or access, a forum and will not always provide a country of residence (Burri et al., 2006).

Ethical Issues

Informed by discussions about the ethical use of online data (Roberts, 2015), formal ethical clearance was not sought for this study. Forum data were publicly accessible at the time of data collection and did not require forum registration to view. It was also assumed that posters were aware of the public availability of their posts. Although we provide the title of the forums in Table 1, names and details of the individual posters have been omitted to maintain anonymity for posters. Further, we did not participate in any of the forum discussions.

Data Analysis

Data were extracted from online forums and each forum discussion thread was copied into a separate Microsoft Word file. The first author read each data file to ensure familiarity with the content. Taking an inductive approach to thematically code the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the first author focused on the articulation of the safety (or lack thereof) of vaping during

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