My Turn: Suzanne Colby: Tobacco industry can’t be trusted

By Suzanne Colby
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In his Jan 17 Commentary piece (“Anti-tobacco fanatics, from R.I. to D.C.”), Mike Stenhouse warns readers about “anti-tobacco fanatics” who are suppressing individual rights by restricting tobacco products that could improve public health. He argues that consumers would be healthier if these fanatics would just let new, safer, tobacco products enter the marketplace without government interference. Once available, adults would be free to choose whether or not to use them.

While there is much to challenge in the column, the most important point is this: Stenhouse’s arguments rely on the unsupported assumption that the tobacco industry can be trusted to provide accurate information about its products.

It has been widely documented that the tobacco industry lied to consumers about the safety of its products for decades. In encouraging the use of its products, the tobacco industry is responsible for the deaths of nearly half a million Americans, and 5 million people worldwide, every year.

Even after the 1964 Surgeon General’s report provided overwhelming evidence from 7,000 scientific reports that smoking caused lung cancer, Philip Morris International, a leading maker of cigarettes, persisted in its lies, stating: “We don’t accept the idea that there are harmful agents in tobacco.” Evidence later showed that the company had been aware of cigarettes’ link to cancer by the early 1960s.

In subsequent years, the tobacco industry introduced one “safer” cigarette after another. By 2001, the large majority of cigarettes sold in the United States were marketed as low-tar, light, and ultra-light. It took years of independent research to show that industry claims of reduced harm were untrue.

The tobacco industry’s long history of lying to consumers demonstrated the need for government regulation of tobacco products. Congress gave the Food and Drug Administration authority over tobacco products in 2009.

Stenhouse claims the FDA opposes bringing any reduced-harm tobacco product to market, citing as evidence that the FDA has never approved such a product. But the first viable application for such a product was only filed last March, and its review is...
nearing completion.

The product, introduced by Philip Morris and the Altria group, is the IQOS heat-not-burn product, which Stenhouse says reduces “up to 90 percent of the health risks associated with traditional cigarettes.” That quote comes directly from Philip Morris. While Stenhouse is willing to accept this industry claim at face value, U.S. law requires that the FDA evaluate evidence for the claim before approving it. The process is time-consuming but necessary to protect consumers.

Last July, Scott Gottlieb, the FDA commissioner, said unequivocally that reduced-harm products are an essential component of a comprehensive approach to regulating tobacco products in support of public health. The FDA sees reduced-harm products as part of the solution to the deathly toll of tobacco. But this solution relies on FDA oversight, to ensure that reduced harm claims by the tobacco industry are backed up by solid research evidence.

Stenhouse says consumers should be free to make informed choices about whether or not to use tobacco products. I agree. But truly informed choices depend on accurate information.

Many of us who have measured the carnage of tobacco products over decades, and who know the history of the tobacco industry’s lies, are happy that the FDA is independently evaluating industry health claims.

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