Mr. Gabriel Wikström  
Minister for Health Care, Public Health and Sport  
Socialdepartementet  
Regeringskansliet  
103 33 Stockholm  
Sweden

Dear Mr Wikström,

**Snus and Sweden’s unique global responsibility and opportunity**

We are writing as independent experts to note one of Sweden’s great health successes and indicate the urgency to communicate this internationally. That success is the widespread use of low-risk oral tobacco (snus) to quit smoking and as an alternative to high-risk tobacco in cigarettes. To external observers, Sweden has achieved notable success in reducing tobacco-related harm.

Given its contribution to better public health in Sweden, evidence-based information on snus should be shared. States which have ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control gather soon at the biennial Conference of Parties (COP7) in New Delhi, November 7-12, 2016. This is an opportunity for the Swedish government delegation to lead the discussion on practical ways of further reducing the harms caused by smoking cigarettes.

**Sweden’s unique health success.** Sweden has the lowest rate of smoking in Europe at 11%, compared with the EU average of 26% [1]. The recent UK Royal College of Physicians report [2] notes the contribution of snus to reducing smoking prevalence in Sweden. The mortality attributable to tobacco among men is lower in Sweden than in any other EU Member State and the use of snus has been an important contributor to this situation [3,4]. The risks associated with snus are of the order of 95% to 99% lower than for smoking, hence the reduced burden of tobacco related disease (cancers, COPD, cardiovascular disease).

**Tobacco harm reduction.** Snus is a popular and acceptable alternative to smoking tobacco among Swedish men. It is a proof of the concept that safer nicotine products are attractive to smokers, and that tobacco harm reduction approaches have a significant role to play in helping people to switch from smoking, or to avoid smoking in the first place. It complements other tobacco control initiatives. Data from Norway show similar health gains since snus has become popular [5].
Harm reduction is mandated in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Three separate strategies are mandated in the English original of FCTC Art 1d [6] which states that “tobacco control” means a range of supply, demand and harm reduction strategies’. So far, Harm Reduction has been neglected by the WHO FCTC secretariat and member states. Promoting complete bans on smokeless products and other nicotine products, or overly restricting and regulating them, as seems to be the current ambition of the COP/FCTC, will cause harm instead of reducing harm.

Swedish snus can be produced at a fraction of the cost of other reduced risk nicotine products such as e-cigarettes. This indicates the very large potential for this intervention to reduce smoking in Low and Middle Income Countries. It is regrettable that at the last Conference of the Parties in 2014 (COP6), Sweden signed a declaration that incorrectly equates the dangers of Asian and African smokeless products (which can pose serious health risks though less than those of smoked tobacco) with the significantly safer Swedish snus. Delegates to the FCTC meeting should be reminded about the special characteristics of snus (it being pasteurized and cooled) that distinguish it from other oral tobaccos.

As international experts concerned about the neglect by the WHO FCTC and COP with regard to harm reduction strategies, we call on the Swedish government to provide information of the contribution of snus to improving public health. It is in the interest of public health to provide accurate information to smokers that if they switch to snus, they will dramatically reduce risks to their health [3]. We encourage the Swedish government at COP7 to present the evidence that snus represents an important and possibly unprecedented opportunity to reduce the toll of smoking related death and disease.

Despite current tobacco control efforts, smoking is increasing globally. The Swedish government has the opportunity in New Delhi to show that there are effective and acceptable alternatives that can be used to help bring about an end to smoking.

With kind regards
Anders Milton

Past Chair of the Swedish Medical Association and the World Medical Association, past President of the Swedish Red Cross and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, Stockhol, Sweden
on behalf of the following signatories:

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References


