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Michael Bloomberg loves data. Except when he doesn't.

The billionaire philanthropist's anti-tobacco campaigns against vaping won't listen to dissenting views

Kim Gunther · 1 hour ago · 6 min read ·

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Michael Bloomberg, the philanthropist and former New York City mayor, made a fortune estimated at $23 billion plus, so it's no wonder that he loves to talk about data and its value.

His foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, which says it is "using data to save lives" making vaping rules to deploy data and evidence. Bloomberg said during his presidential campaign that "data is more important than ever in the era of fake news and alternative facts." He pledged to "let Gold ever. Everyone else: bring data. The numbers speak." Let science, and good data, and good evidence guide your policy."

Yet Bloomberg's interest in data has its limits. Some of the world's leading experts on tobacco and public health have been trying for years to meet with him and share evidence showing that his foundation's opposition to flavored e-cigarettes is doing more harm than good.

Bloomberg declined.

In a letter, the public health experts wrote:

> *Your famous injunction "In God we trust. Everyone else, bring data" is a good one, and should be a universal mantra in philanthropy. But it implies a commitment to data, even when it is challenging data not to your philanthropic aims will be various certainly about what works, what does not work, and the plausible perverse consequences of well-intentioned interventions.*

The signatories included Steven Schroeder, the former president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Cheryl Healton, the founding president of the anti-smoking nonprofit now called the Truth Initiative, who went on to lead school of public health at New York University; and Kenneth Warner, dean emeritus of the public health school at the University of Michigan. All have devoted their careers to tobacco control.

"No willingness to debate"

R. Michael Gottfredson, a professor at the Medical University of South Carolina who has testified in more than 200 cases against tobacco manufacturers, said Bloomberg's refusal to meet with his critics was "pretty disappointing."

Cummings, the lead author on the letter, told me: "There is no willingness to debate. They've decided that the science is done."

It isn't, of course. Late vaping, a most prolonged study of San Francisco's bus on flavored vapes raised concerns that bans on flavored e-cigarettes "may motivate youths who would otherwise turn to substance smoking." (That's awful, if true. Vaping is much less dangerous than smoking.) In August, fifteen past presidents of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco, the preeminent scientific society focused on smoking, warned in a rare balanced and nuanced approach to vaping in the American Journal of Public Health that "Bans on flavored e-cigarettes and other tobacco products for adult smokers deserve intensive equal to the risks to youths." In December, the government-backed Bloomberg-led Partnership found that non-smoking ban again fallen to an old straw low, undermining the claim that vaping is a gateway to smoking.

Cliff Douglas, a former vice president of the American Cancer Society who signed the letter, told me by email:

> *Mike Bloomberg and his expert team should welcome open, transparent discussion, especially with nationally and globally recognized experts. It is hard to understand why they would decline even to meet and exchange information or be afraid to do so. All we wish to do is provide information and data and expertise by questions that we believe, in fact, will shed the line and well bring of millions of people. What's the downside to that?*

Right about here, I should disclose that the experts' letter to Bloomberg Philanthropies was prompted, in part, by my March 2021 story for the Chronicle of Philanthropy, headlined Bloomberg's Millions Funded an Effective Campaign Against Vaping. Could It Do More Harm Than Good?

Citing experts including Schroeder, Warner and Douglas, the story put forth evidence that Bloomberg Philanthropies' $165 million anti-vaping initiative is "misguided, built on unsound science, and likely to do more harm than good."

In May 2021, twenty-three tobacco-control experts wrote to Bloomberg to express a private meeting with a small group. (Here's the letter, which has not been previously released.) They urged him to take a more nuanced approach to vaping products, which they said, offer "tremendous opportunities to reduce the burden of smoking-related non-communicable diseases — the desired outcome we all share." About 480,000 Americans die each year from smoking-related illnesses; no deaths have been attributed to vaping.

Bloomberg Philanthropies responded in June with its own letter. Kelly Henning, who leads the public health program at Bloomberg, wrote: "From our perspective, the evidence that flavored e-cigarettes attract and addict youth is strong and the evidence that flavored products are contributing in a meaningful and measurable manner to reducing cigarette use in the US on a population basis is weak."

The public health experts cited over, this time with letter and a document of nearly 10,000 words laying out a series of challenges to Bloomberg and his most important ally, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. It's well worth a read. It did not get them an audience with Bloomberg.

"I have earned my place in heaven"

The 79-year-old Bloomberg, whose age is as vast as his fortune, does not appear to suffer from self-doubt. Some years ago, when referring to his work on smoking, obesity and gun control, he said The New York Times: "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."

All of this raises questions about the power and responsibility of Big Philanthropy—the topic that first drew me into the polarized debate over vaping.

Simply put, Bloomberg Philanthropies is accountable to no one. This philanthropic freedom can be a beautiful thing; it allows foundations to support unpopular causes. **But when foundations generate unintended consequences and negative outcomes, they need not explain themselves. Indeed, they are under no obligation even to evaluate their work.**

Nor do most foundations even have to close people whose lives they set out to change—vapers and smokers, in the case of Bloomberg. The idea of "problem about us without us" — is off-be policy makers to listen to those they affect — is not easy to connect philanthropy's underinvestment power.

Many former smokers who quit by taking up vaping would, I'm sure, love to meet with Michael Bloomberg. They want to say, "data," But they are men and women who believe their lives have been saved by vaping. Their society is that Bloomberg and his allies want to deny their opportunity to others.

xxxx

Disclosure: Readers have asked if I have sought or accepted money or other benefits from tobacco or e-cigarette companies. I have not and will not. I'm writing about tobacco policy because I think it's important and deserves more attention. I invite you to subscribe to my work by entering your email below.

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The nonprofit Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes itself as "the nation's leading science-based, data-driven, service organization that protects the public's health." It pledges to "base all public health decisions on the highest quality scientific data."

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The unrelenting assault on vaping is taking a toll

Smokers find it harder to get e-cigarettes, which can save lives.

Photo by Yan Gesko on Unsplash

Kim "Skip" Murray smoked for 40 years. "I tried to quit so many times that I quit trying to quit," she says. Only after her son, Tom, a former smoker who had suffered a heart attack, gave her an e-cigarette did she break her two-pack-a-day habit. ...

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Lies, damn lies and (vaping) statistics

Fewer teenagers appear to be using e-cigarettes, but the FDA and anti-nicotine crusaders see only reasons to regulate.

Photo by Christian Erfurt on Unsplash

You wouldn't know it by reading press releases from the FDA or CDC or by listening to the Campaigns for Tobacco-Free Kids or the Truth Initiative, but the US government released encouraging news last week about youth vaping.

The headline from the latest National Youth Tobacco Survey should have been, ...

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"Vaping can benefit public health."

Leading tobacco scientists call for a more balanced approach to e-cigarettes. It's a matter of social justice, they say.

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In a rebuke to the activists, politicians and government officials who have led a crusade against youth vaping, a group of eminent tobacco scientists are urging authorities to consider the benefits of e-cigarettes as well as their risks.

Writing in the American Journal of Public Health, fifteen past presidents of ...

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Why do opponents of vaping want to suppress or dismiss science?

We need to learn more, not less, about e-cigarettes.

Photo: Vapers at Vapecon, Chicago, by Shutterstock (Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

E-cigarettes have fractured the tobacco-control community. Some researchers argue that vaping nicotine saves lives by helping smokers quit. Others say that e-cigarettes are dangerous, especially for young people. The debate is by no means settled.

So you'd think that all involved would welcome more science. Sadly, that's not so.

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