



CDC's Tom Frieden: Putting Dogma First

By Andrew Stuttaford

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That a bullying authoritarian such as Nurse Bloomberg's former top doctor, Tom Frieden, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health, went on to secure the top job at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under the Obama administration was no great surprise. And nor is the fact that Frieden appears to put dogma before saving lives.

Over at *Overlawyered*, Walter Olson [explains](#):

Actual cigarette smoking among teens, the kind that requires inhaling carcinogenic products of combustion, is down a startling 25 percent in one year and nearly 42 percent since 2011. The reason is the rapid substitution of vaping or e-cigarettes, which hold singular promise as a harm-reduction measure for those drawn to the nicotine habit. Great news, right? Not if you listen to Thomas Frieden of the Centers for Disease Control, who's doing his best to disguise good tidings as bad so as to stoke the officially encouraged panic about vaping.

Over at the *New York Times*, Joe Nocera [goes into](#) more detail:

In a conference call with reporters, Tom Frieden...couldn't stop talking about how awful this was. "It's important that everyone, parents and kids, understand that nicotine is dangerous for kids at any age, whether it's an e-cigarette, hookah, cigarette or a cigar," he said. In addition to being addictive, nicotine was thought to affect the still-maturing adolescent brain — although Frieden also acknowledged that this had mainly been shown in animal studies, rather than studies of adolescents.

What's more, he feared that there was a "significant likelihood that a proportion of those who are using e-cigarettes will go on to use combustible cigarettes."

"A proportion".

Well, thank you, Dr. Frieden, #science, I guess.

In fact, the experience of snus, a form of moist tobacco popular in Sweden that is almost infinitely safer than cigarettes, would suggest that a safer substitute is more likely to be a gateway away from cigarettes than an introduction to them (I recently [blogged](#) about the FDA

and snus over at Ricochet). There is no real reason to think that ecigarettes would operate very differently.

And in *fact* (back to Nocera):

[B]uried in the news release — and played down by Frieden and others at the C.D.C. — was an astonishing fact. Actual cigarette smoking — the kind that requires inhaling carcinogens, that kills one out of every two long-term smokers and that public health officials have been trying to eradicate for decades — that kind of smoking has dropped to a mere 9.2 percent among teens...the first time that teen smoking in America has ever hit single digits....

In fact, to take it a step further, it seems pretty obvious that the decline in cigarette smoking has largely been caused by the rising popularity of e-cigarettes. This, too, was denied by Frieden. But as David Swenor, a tobacco policy expert at the University of Ottawa, put it to me: “What other huge interventions have there been? It’s not like there has been a big new cigarette tax, or tough new package warnings. The only thing that is new is the introduction of e-cigarettes.”

The whole of Nocera’s piece is well worth reading.

For his part, Olsen is too kind about Frieden. In his headline, he describes the CDC chief as being “in denial” about the good news that vaping’s popularity represents.

That’s not the case. Frieden is many things, but he is not a fool. What he is, however, is an absolutist, a moral crusader, *pur et dur*, who enjoys wielding the power that the nanny state has given him, and, of course, the opportunity to show his own (as he sees it) superior virtue. There can be no compromise with tobacco or even (in isolation, far safer) with nicotine, at least if the latter is associated with pleasure rather than the weaning process represented by patches or gum.

Of course, this position, like that taken by the EU against snus, will cost lives, something Frieden may see as regrettable, but inevitable in the course of a broader crusade: no omelet without breaking eggs, as the saying goes.