

SRNT Europe Debate: Is Nicotine Use Rational?

Conferences are often a place of inspiration and transformational challenge. Listening to others present new and exciting research can help us to think about the future, to think about how we can improve our research, and to allow a space for creative “Blue Sky” thinking. This is the foundation of the scientific method—hypotheses arise from debate, introspection, and constructive intellectual challenge. Listening to presentations is of course the basis of what researchers do at conferences. But all research is situated within a context that fundamentally influences our assumptions, worldviews, and moral positions. Although we might not always be open to this, our beliefs underpinning the theory and interpretations of the evidence crucially influence the research environment and culture in which we operate. The standard confines of research presentations and posters do not *quite* allow the expression of broader ideas and theories that researchers have. We should create a space for reflecting on the bigger questions because as we move toward a changing nicotine and tobacco landscape, we are faced with many opposing views, dualisms, and big questions that draw on our understanding of multiple pieces of evidence and theories, some of which are being disrupted with innovations. With this in mind, in 2023, the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco-European (SRNT-E) conference held its first debate. As incoming President of SRNT-E, and with the conference in my hometown, London, I (Sharon Cox, SC) wanted to mark the conference with something new. A debate seemed the perfect way to get attendees engaged in the bigger questions and to increase participation from the very start.

To be inclusive, members of the SRNT-E board sent out requests on social media for ideas for the debate to be submitted to SC. Anyone could submit an idea for the debate. We requested a research question and three statements as to why this was important. These were then anonymized and sent out for independent review. The highest rated was “Is nicotine use rational?”

The debate was chaired by Caitlin Notley. She chose to take a formal but collegial approach, adhering to the Oxford Union-style debating etiquette: [Oxford Union-style debate](#) | [ECGI](#). Broadly this means respect for other’s views, not interrupting, keeping strictly to time, no interjections from the floor during the speeches, and certainly no heckling! Debating skills are perhaps the epitome of the academic skillset—calling on presenting the evidence for persuasive

effect, delivered in a convincing and well-crafted narrative. Debaters are, of course, at liberty to use their powers of persuasion in surprising or innovative ways, although the audience was instructed to follow formal etiquette. In our field, approaches that may not be evidence-based—opinion, experiential viewpoints, and anecdotes, are all legitimate debating tools. The only reason therefore that a speaker may be interrupted is potentially due to a “point of order” that could be upheld by the chair if necessary. Any “point of clarification” must be held until the audience’s question and answer session.

We began with an audience vote, demonstrating that the conference audience was about evenly divided, voting both in favor of and against the motion that nicotine use is rational. Each speaker had strictly 5 minutes, and no more, to make their key points. The proposer, arguing for the motion that nicotine use is rational, started, followed by the opposing side, before moving back to the second proposer and then the opposer. Then there were questions from the audience. Following this, our speakers made their final statements and rebuttals, before we closed with an audience vote. In this vote, we saw a slight shift in audience opinion, voting for a close but majority view that nicotine use *is not* rational. What does this mean for our field, as the majority view of leading academics and scientists?

We invite you to engage with the debate as proposed and opposed, and welcome your comments as we continue this core debate underpinning the evolution of science in our field.

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Declaration of Interests

None declared.

Author Contributions

Sharon Cox (Conceptualization [equal], Writing—original draft [equal]) and Caitlin Notley (Writing—original draft [equal])