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EU Tobacco Ban Meets Its Swedish Match

**Lawmaker Sells Snus
From his Office, Says
It Helps Smokers Quit**

By **ADAM COHEN**

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BRUSSELS -- Christopher Fjellner, a member of the European Parliament, says he won't apologize for breaking the law.

From his Brussels office, the Swedish lawmaker sells a Scandinavian chewing tobacco called snus (it rhymes with moose). The European Union banned snus sales in 1992 amid concerns about oral cancer and other health problems. But Mr. Fjellner says snus is safer than smoking and can help nicotine addicts reduce the risk of cancer.

Mr. Fjellner's act of civil disobedience comes at a sensitive time for EU policymakers. The bloc is toughening its stance on tobacco use and weighing a broad ban on smoking in public places by 2009.


Snus poses a particularly difficult dilemma: Should regulators allow a potentially harmful product on the market if it can help wean people off cigarettes, a more dangerous one? Pressure from tobacco companies, which see snus as a potential lifeline amid falling cigarette sales, and drug companies, which don't want snus to compete with stop-smoking products such as nicotine gum and patches, further complicates the issue.

The European Commission is studying whether to lift its 1992 ban on snus sales. A decision is expected later this month. People familiar with the review say the commission is unlikely to overturn the ban, but might modify rules to allow more snus sales.

Using snus is legal throughout the EU, but the pouched tobacco can be sold only in Sweden, where the product has been made since the 19th century. Norway, which isn't an EU country, also has a strong snus tradition, while EU members Finland and Denmark have smaller numbers of snus users.

When Sweden joined the EU in 1995, it received an exemption from the sales ban. Without this special status, the country might have stayed independent. When Swedes voted on whether to join the bloc, bumper stickers around the country proclaimed, "Yes to the EU, but not if I have to sacrifice my snus!"

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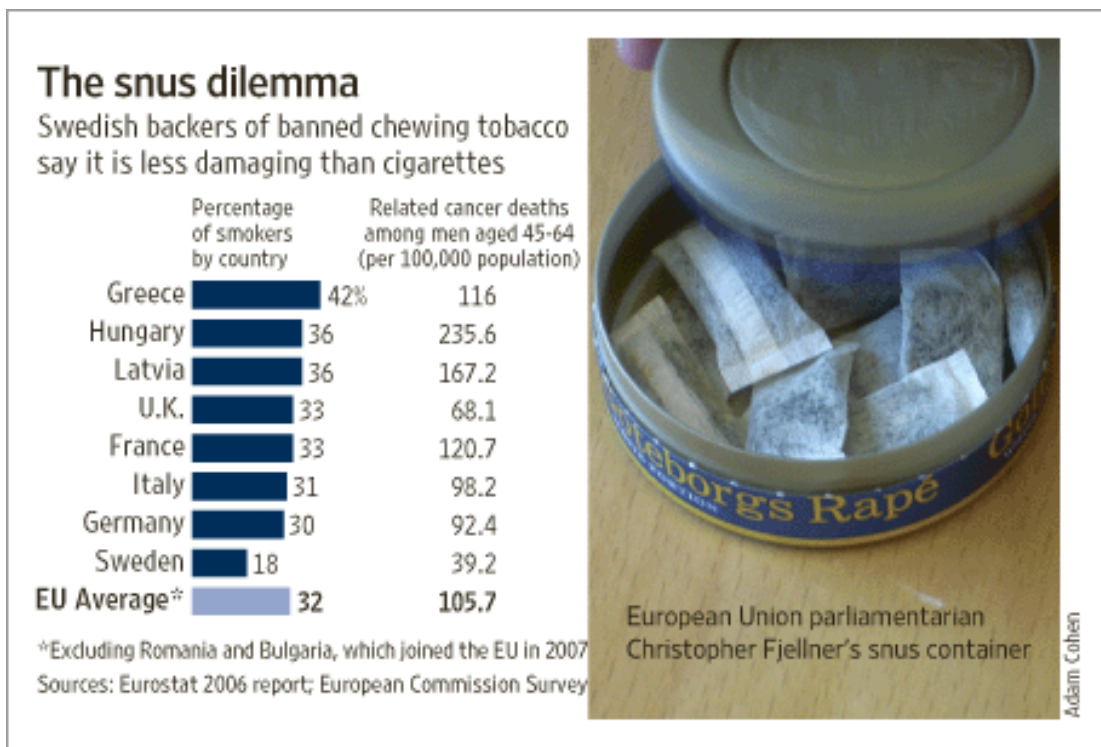
Since then, Sweden's experience with snus and dogged lobbying from tobacco company **Swedish Match AB** have pushed scientists and regulators to re-examine the product and its possible public-health benefits.

According to a 2006 European Commission survey, 18% of Swedes smoke, the lowest level in the EU. Greece, where 42% of the population smokes, is at the other end of the spectrum. Related cases of lung cancer and heart disease are lower in Sweden than anywhere else in Europe.

Swedes also are among the most successful at quitting smoking among EU citizens, with 29% of the country saying they have kicked the habit in the commission survey. Mr. Fjellner, who used to smoke a pack a day, credits snus with curbing his addiction. He says he has tried nicotine gum, but claims only snus did the trick.

Sweden is a famously health-obsessed country, with state-funded trips to health spas and strict laws governing almost everything in the workplace and home that could be considered dangerous. Though some medical experts say smokeless tobacco like snus causes cancer, many Swedes, including Mr. Fjellner, insist it is safe to use.

Researchers in other countries increasingly are echoing Swedish scientists' findings. A study published last year in the *Lancet*, a U.K. medical journal, said weaning smokers onto snus might be a good idea.



"Current smokers who switch to snus rather than continuing to smoke can realize substantial health gains. Snus could produce a net benefit to [public health] if it is adopted in sufficient numbers by inveterate smokers," the study said.

A second study in the *Lancet* said snus users don't have a greater risk of lung or oral cancers than people who never smoke. While the study found that snus users are twice as

likely as nonsmokers to contract pancreatic cancer, they are less likely to have it than smokers.

Some medical experts are still skeptical.

"We've got nicotine replacement therapy and that, in the majority of cases, does jolly well," said Alexander Macara, former chairman of the British Medical Association and an expert on public health and addiction. "The medical evidence in favor of snus is ambiguous, not definitive."

Pharmaceutical companies, heavily invested in the multibillion-dollar market for stop-smoking products, are lobbying the commission to maintain the ban on snus sales.

GlaxoSmithKline PLC, which sells nicotine chewing gum and patches under the Nicorette and Nicoderm brand names in the U.S. and NiQuitin brand in Europe, says it has discussed its objections to snus with commission officials.

"There is an insidious impression that snus is a safe way to have a tobacco addiction. But snus has cancer-causing chemicals," a company spokeswoman said.

Pfizer Inc., which makes a drug designed to treat smoking addiction called Chantix in the U.S. and Champix in Europe, is "observing" the EU debate over snus, company spokesman Oliver Stohlmann said.

But tobacco companies, watching sales weaken in the wake of recent smoking bans in France, Italy and other EU countries, are pushing snus as an alternative to cigarettes. The volume of cigarette sales in the EU dropped 14.5% between 2002 and 2006 according to data from market-research-firm Euromonitor.

British American Tobacco PLC describes snus as a "harm reduction" product. It started selling snus under its Lucky Strike and Peter Stuyvesant brands in Sweden and South Africa over two years ago.

"The tide is in favor of the EU ban being lifted," said Catherine Armstrong, a BAT spokeswoman in London.

Other cigarette makers, including **Reynolds American Inc.** and **Altria Group Inc.** are considering selling snus products in the U.S., with test marketing under way in several cities. Spokesmen for both companies say they are monitoring the snus debate in Europe, but have no plans to sell snus on the Continent.

Snus is sold in small, round containers, each holding 20 tobacco pouches that look like tiny tea bags. A less-common type of snus, which is legal for sale in both Sweden and Denmark, is packaged as loose tobacco, with users forming their own small clumps to place in their upper lips.

Studies show that snus has lower levels of nitrosamines, a cancer-causing chemical found in tobacco products, than its American equivalent, known as dip. Tobacco makers attribute this difference to the production process: snus is steam-cured while dip is fermented.

These attributes, combined with a still-potent nicotine kick are luring some smokers to try snus. A Swedish co-worker gave Toby Brown his first taste of snus a few months ago. Since then, the 32-year-old executive at a German apparel company, has quit cigarettes. He likes that he can use snus in the office, on long flights and in bars where smoking is banned.

Others don't take to the product. "I used to have a Polish guy who was trying to quit smoking come to my office to buy snus," Mr. Fjellner said. "I think he went back to cigarettes."

Mr. Fjellner keeps his snus in a small, specially designed refrigerator under his desk. He isn't hiding it and will sell to anyone who comes to his door.

"I hope someone comes to arrest me, just to let people know how stupid the EU regulation is," Mr. Fjellner

said, his upper lip bulging slightly.

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