

POSITION STATEMENT

Smoking in movies: countering the public health impact



Smoking in movies glamorises and promotes nicotine addiction; measures are required to address its negative impact on public health.

Key messages

- The depiction of smoking in movies and by actors with youth appeal is common.
- Research evidence strongly suggests that the depiction of smoking in movies is a significant contributor to the uptake of smoking among young people.
- The tobacco industry has a history of product placement* in movies. Consistent with the findings of independent research, the industry has long considered product placement to be an effective form of promotion.
- Tobacco brands are still appearing in movies despite industry claims to have ceased product placement. The appearance of such brands reduces the impact of the *Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992*.
- A number of strategies have been proposed to counter the public health impact of smoking in movies. The only strategy for which there exists some evidence of efficacy is counter-advertising.
- Counter-advertising in this context comprises the placement of tobacco control advertisements of proven effectiveness immediately prior to movies that depict tobacco and its use. Placement can be in cinema or on DVD format.
- Legislative mechanisms exist to mandate tobacco control counter-advertising.
- As it is technically possible to attach an anti-smoking advertisement to the print of each movie, this is a low-cost and efficient strategy to implement.
- Counter-advertising can be complemented by a range of other activity aimed at raising critical awareness of the impact of smoking in movies.
- International regulations of relevance in countering the depiction of smoking in movies include the requirement for all movies credits to include certification of 'no inducements' and the banning of tobacco brand depictions in movies.
- The recommendations in this position statement (see below) are consistent with the intent of current bans on traditional forms of tobacco advertising enshrined in the *Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992*.

* For the purposes of this position statement, product placement is defined the provision by a corporate entity of product or money to the film media in exchange for the favourable portrayal of the product.

Cancer Council Australia recommendations

1. State and territory governments amend public health legislation to mandate the placement of strong, health-body approved tobacco control advertisements prior to cinema screenings of movies and at the front DVD-format movies that contain depictions of smoking.
2. Governments and non-government organisations complement such a strategy through activity aimed at raising the public's critical awareness of the public health impact of the depiction of smoking in movies.
3. Australian Government and Framework Convention Alliance (FCA) representatives consider using the development of FCTC guidelines on advertising, promotion and marketing to regulate certification of 'no inducements' and to ban tobacco brand depictions in movies.

Background and discussion

Why does smoking in movies need to be addressed?

Tobacco advertising and promotion contributes to the uptake of smoking by young people.¹ There is a now a sizable and still growing body of evidence that strongly suggests that the depiction of smoking in movies is a significant contributor to youth smoking uptake.

Many youth-appealing movies feature tobacco use. Among recent examples are *Oceans 13*, *Lord of The Rings*, *Ghost Rider*, *Smoking Aces* and *Sin City*. Similarly, actors who are admired by young people smoke regularly in movies. Some of these are Keanu Reeves, Nicole Kidman, Scarlett Johansson, Brad Pitt and Hugh Jackman.

Findings from the international research literature published in recent years have led to growing concern about the impact of smoking in movies. The findings include the following:

- Teenagers whose favourite stars smoke on screen are up to 16 times more likely to think favourably of smoking, and are more likely to smoke than those whose favourite stars don't.^{2,3}
- A major US study found that adolescents exposed to high levels of movie smoking were almost 3 times more likely to smoke than those with little exposure.⁴
- Smoking in film has a stronger impact on smoking uptake among young people than traditional forms of cigarette advertising.⁵
- A survey of students in New Zealand found that they regarded on-screen smoking imagery as a highly accurate reflection of reality.⁶ Authors of the survey report noted previous research showing that smoking prevalence in film is unrealistically high and conforms to the perception that it is a normal adult behaviour.
- An Australian study found that tobacco use was portrayed as socially acceptable in 95% of smoking scenes and unacceptable in only 5% of such scenes.⁷ This is at odds with current real-world social attitudes.
- In another Australian study involving 16 focus groups of school students, media images of smoking were perceived to be normal and acceptable.⁸ They identified with the stress-relieving and social aspects of smoking despite being aware of harmful health effects of tobacco use.
- A study of the ability of cinema patrons to recall and recognise products featured in movies found that people under 18 years of age had the best recall of tobacco products.⁹

- Research has shown that movies that feature smoking can weaken the resolve of young people not to smoke. The authors found that:

...films suggest that smoking is an acceptable and normal behaviour so that, when young people are tempted to smoke, they succumb.

The authors also reported that:

...the context of smoking, whether it was in happy and exciting scenes, or sad and depressing scenes, did not alter the impact of smoking. In both cases the subjects' perceptions of smokers were enhanced.¹⁰

- 49% of NSW secondary school students believe that smoking by celebrities encourages young people to take up smoking.¹¹
- Consistent with the finding immediately above, a US survey found that over 80% of adults agreed that “smoking in movies influences teens to smoke”.¹²
- For younger moviegoers, brands in movies have been found to symbolise belonging and security.¹³

Trends in smoking in movies since the 1950s

Glantz et al reviewed smoking incidents in a random sample of top-grossing movies from the 1950s through to the early 2000s. The review found that “smoking incidents declined from 10.7 incidents per hour in 1950 to a minimum of 4.9 in 1980–1982, but increased to 10.9 in 2002”.¹⁴

The majority of youth-rated movies (US G, PG and PG-13) released in the US between 1996 and 2004 contained smoking. Specifically, 75% of these films featured smoking.¹⁵ During the same period, smoking incidents in adult-oriented movies declined. Furthermore, of the approximately 32.6 billion tobacco impressions in first-run movies delivered by the U.S. movie industry to audiences of all ages between 1999 and 2003, 8.3 billion of these were delivered to children and teenagers.¹⁶ Another study on the exposure of tobacco impressions in movies found an average of 665 impressions was delivered to each US adolescent aged 10 to 14 years.¹⁷

Tobacco industry promotion of smoking in film?

Product placement in movies is a common and rapidly growing product promotion strategy.¹⁸

Internal tobacco industry documents now in the public realm (as a result of the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement in the US) have revealed that the industry for many years embedded its advertising in movies through product placement strategies. These strategies have included financial payments to film producers and actors as well as the provision of tobacco products. Documented examples of financial payments have included:

- **\$350,000** to have Lark cigarettes appear in the 1989 James Bond movie *License to Kill*
- **\$42,000** to place Marlboro cigarettes in *Superman II*
- **\$30,000** to place Eve cigarettes in *Supergirl*
- over **\$5,000** to have Lucky Strike appear in *Beverly Hills Cop*.¹⁹

Another document from the Brown & Williamson tobacco company comprised a copy of a letter of agreement from Hollywood superstar Sylvester Stallone to “use Brown and Williamson products in no less than five feature films” for a fee of \$500,000.²⁰

The tobacco industry has long considered product placement to be a more effective form of promotion than traditional forms of advertising.²¹ Significantly, traditional forms of tobacco advertising are prohibited in Australia by the *Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992*.

Many of the films in which tobacco product placement occurred have strong - and in some cases (e.g. *Grease*) ongoing - appeal to children or adolescents. A sample of these movies include:²²

<i>Die Hard</i>	<i>Grease</i>
<i>Superman II</i>	<i>Rocky II</i>
<i>The Muppet Movie</i>	<i>Who Framed Roger Rabbit?</i>
<i>Crocodile Dundee</i>	<i>Jaws II</i>

Tobacco brands continue to appear in movies. This is despite the statements from at least one tobacco company that it is now opposed to the placement of its products in movies.²³ Suspiciously, these brand exposures often have the appearance of product placement. For example, the 2006 movie *Bobby* - about the late Senator Robert Kennedy (who, ironically in this context, was a strong opponent of the tobacco industry) - featured a 30 second centre screen display of a Marlboro cigarette package. Whether brand appearances are the result of paid product placement or not, the pro-tobacco impact on youth is the same.²⁴

Concern and action from within the film industry

The film industry itself has recently taken action to address the acknowledged harms of smoking depictions in movies. Within Hollywood, there have been a number of developments. For example:

- The Weinstein Company film studio has agreed to insert tobacco control advertisements in DVDs that include depictions of smoking.²⁵
- The Walt Disney Company has also made a commitment to discourage smoking depictions in its films by placing an anti-smoking public service announcement (PSA) on DVDs of future films that depict smoking. As well, Disney has stated that the company will work with cinema owners to encourage the screening of an anti-smoking PSA before the exhibition of such films. The policy will apply to Disney, Touchstone and Miramax films.²⁶
- A number of film directors have consciously eliminated smoking from their films on ethical grounds. For example:
 - David Frankel, the Director of the critically acclaimed movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, commenting on the absence of smoking in his film said:

*This was absolutely a conscious decision. I deplore smoking and the glamorisation of smoking. I am personally against the marketing of cigarettes to young people, and to girls in particular. And the studio, Twentieth Century Fox, strongly discourages onscreen smoking in its films.*²⁷
 - Similarly, the director of the latest James Bond movie *Casino Royale*, Martin Campbell, is reported to have said there was no need for James Bond to smoke and that smoking is not essential to the character and not desirable.²⁸

Review of strategies to counter the health impact of smoking in movies

A number of strategies have been proposed to counter the pro-smoking influences of smoking in movies. These are briefly discussed below.

A ban on the depiction of smoking in movies?

Cancer Council does not oppose smoking in movies per se. We recognise, that smoking is a part of the real world and, as such, its depiction is sometimes appropriate. We also recognise that smoking in film can sometimes work *for* tobacco control rather than against it e.g. if health effects are realistically depicted. Cancer Council therefore does not support a ban on smoking in movies.

Certification of no inducements in film credits?

One regulatory option is to require movie producers to certify that there have been no inducements to include smoking in the movie and for such certifications to be listed in the credits of all movies. The potential effect of this regulation is to confirm for the film industry that it is not permitted to accept inducements in return for depicting smoking or tobacco products as part of the movie. Given that the majority of movies are made overseas, such a regulatory option would be best pursued internationally. The development of guidelines on advertising, promotion and sponsorship under the FCTC provide a mechanism for considering such regulations.

Delivery documentation certification?

Film distributors could be encouraged to require movie producers to certify that no tobacco money has been received in relation to the making of particular movies. In Australia, inducements to include smoking in film are illegal under the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992 (TAPA) and some state legislation (eg NSW Public Health Act). Film distributors already require certification from movie producers to ensure compliance with relevant copyright laws (e.g. for music rights, script rights etc.).

While delivery documentation certification is unlikely to have a direct protective effect on movie viewers, it could serve to highlight to legal obligations under the TAPA and relevant state legislation to the film industry. Government film funding agencies could be encouraged to include this measure as a condition for their funding of Australian movies.

It should be noted that proposals for delivery documentation certification in this context might meet with political resistance from film distributors. Also, awareness among film producers of the legislative requirements under the TAPA and relevant state-based legislation may need to be raised.

Film and Television Classification?*

Of the proposed strategies, the one that has generated the most debate within the field of tobacco control, is the proposal to bring movies with smoking into the film classification system.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of this approach is that it will create a forbidden fruit effect. As a prominent Canadian tobacco control advocate put it, the attitude of young people to this approach might be "Ooh, this movie has sex, violence AND smoking. COOL!"²⁹

* In the United States there is currently a major advocacy push for movies that contain smoking to be rated "R". The US classification system differs from the Australian system in two ways. Firstly, the US system is based on a voluntary industry code while in Australia the film and TV classification requirements are legally enforceable. Secondly, the R rating in the US is more akin to the Australian MA15+. "R" in the US advises that a parent or guardian should accompany those under 17. "R" in Australia means that under 18 year olds cannot be admitted. The US equivalent of the Australian "R" rating is NC-17 (no-one 17 or under will be admitted).

On the other hand, the classification system might be a good way of informing parents and carers of the smoking content of movies their younger children may wish to see. It might also act as a disincentive for movie producers to glamorise smoking if they know their otherwise “G” rated movie is to be classified “M” or “R”.

Classification may also be an appropriate criterion for selecting movies that would be appropriate for targeting with counter-advertising (See under sub-heading ‘Strong counter-advertising below’).

Moving beyond these arguments, what is certain is that there is no available research evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the strategy.

Dialogue with the film industry?

Dialogue with the film industry might encourage greater responsibility in the portrayal of smoking by, for example, seeking creative alternatives to the use of tobacco as a dramatic device. However, given that Australian cinema and the DVD movie rental market are dominated by Hollywood productions²⁹, to pursue this strategy in Australia would likely constitute a misallocation of scarce resources.

Banning identification of tobacco brands?

The elimination of tobacco branding from movies would be a positive development. However, as only 8% of movies screened in Australian cinemas are produced in Australia, international regulation would be the most effective way of addressing this issue. The development of guidelines on advertising, promotion and sponsorship under the FCTC provide a mechanism for banning the depiction of identifiable tobacco brands in movies.

Strong counter-advertising?

Cancer Council strongly supports the use of counter-advertising. Counter-advertising - for the purpose of this position statement - is the placement of anti-tobacco advertisements of proven effectiveness prior to movies that portray smoking.

Notwithstanding that the body of existing research evidence on counter-advertising is small, this strategy is likely to reduce the impact of pro-smoking messages in movies.^{30,31}

Counter-advertising has the potential to subvert pro-smoking influences in movies by increasing critical awareness of smoking in film.³² To paraphrase one researcher, counter-advertising can turn on-screen smoking from “forbidden fruit” to “tainted fruit” in the eyes of young viewers.³²

A possible legislative avenue that might ensure appropriate and ongoing funding for the screening of such advertisements in cinemas could be to amend public health legislation to mandate the strategy. For example, in NSW it has been proposed that the NSW Public Health Act (PHA) be amended for this purpose. This would be done in the same way that PHA regulations were amended to mandate the display of tobacco health warnings at the point-of-sale.³³ The PHA amendment would require an advertisement to be attached to any movie that meets agreed criteria. Film distributors are already legally required to attach the rating sign to all movies before they are sent to cinemas for screening so it would be a simple matter for them to attach the advertisement to the original film before it is duplicated for distribution.

Both the Commonwealth Government and State Governments have produced effective and appropriate tobacco control advertisements. Advertisements could be selected from this body of production and made available to film distributors for counter advertising.

²⁹ Only 8 per cent of films screened in Australian cinemas are produced in Australia.

³⁰ Cancer Council NSW has produced an advertisement with this intention. It can be viewed at <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/editorial.asp?pageid=1980>.

Theoretically, film classification legislation could also be used to mandate counter-advertising as well as assess movies for this purpose. However it would require a major legislative change to require anything more than the rating sign be placed before the movie. Furthermore, film classification is not under State or Commonwealth Health Ministers' jurisdiction.

Another argument in favour of counter-advertising is that it leaves "artistic integrity" intact. Justified or not, members of the film industry have opposed the application of the film ratings system to movies with smoking on the basis that it is imposition on artistic integrity. No such objection can be made about counter-advertising which, it can be argued, is no more than an attempt to compete on a level playing field in the battle for hearts and minds.

Significantly, in 2006 41 US State Attorneys-General called upon the major US movie studios to include counter-advertisements on all DVDs, videos and other home viewing formats of movies that contain smoking.³⁴

Other critical awareness raising strategies

Counter-advertising can be complemented by other educational strategies aimed at achieving heightened awareness. For example, Cancer Council NSW has produced printed resources and established web pages (<http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/editorial.asp?pageid=1409> and www.smokinginmovies.com.au) for this purpose.

In the US, an awareness raising strategy undertaken by The American Lung Association (<http://www.saclung.org>) is the annual satirical 'Hackademy Awards' ceremony in which young film reviewers select movies for 'Thumbs Up' or 'Thumbs Down' awards based on their smoking context. This event regularly achieves publicity on this issue in a publicly appealing way.

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