

Silver Screen Is Smoke Screen, Activists Say

For decades, sex and violence have been the primary targets of family friendly criticism of the movies. But a new target is appearing in more and more crosshairs: tobacco use.

[Surgeon General](#) Richard H. Carmona told a House subcommittee last Tuesday he “would support banning or abolishing tobacco products.” The comment shocked members of the committee, as well as tobacco industry spokespeople.

Tobacco-related illness claims almost 5 million lives each year, according to Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, director-general for the [World Health Organization](#). WHO sponsors World No Tobacco Day, which this year emphasized ridding smoking from movies

The day, May 31, provided an opportunity for other groups to stir the debate over tobacco use in movies.

“It’s important to understand that pro-tobacco messages in movies can influence people to pick up a deadly habit,” Shelley Mitchell, program manager for the [American Lung Association of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails](#), told EthicsDaily.com. “When we see these stars light up, that’s a pro-tobacco message, even though it may be an inadvertent thing.”

Mitchell oversees a project called [“Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down!”](#) It aims to raise awareness about the effects of onscreen smoking, which it argues are significant, especially for teenagers.

The project also monitors celebrities’ use of tobacco. For example, it lists celebs who have spoken out against tobacco (e.g. Jackie Chan, Tobey Maguire), as well as those who have smoked onscreen (e.g. Drew Barrymore, Mel Gibson, Russell

Crow).

The site also lists celebrities who have died from tobacco-related illnesses. The list includes Nat King Cole, Michael Landon, Walt Disney and John Wayne.

Each year, in conjunction with the Academy Awards in March, the project dishes out “Hackademy Awards” for the pictures with the best and worst smoking records. This past year’s winner for worst smoking record: “Chicago,” which incidentally also took home the Oscar for Best Picture.

At the same time, the ALA of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails releases its annual report card on Hollywood and tobacco. Each year, young people aged 14-22 in Sacramento review the top 50 domestic movie grossers for tobacco use. The reviewers, trained to analyze the films using standardized forms, note who uses tobacco, where, and the perceived messages sent.

For 2002 movies, the reviewers gave the movies a “C” rating for the perceived message sent, noting that 46 percent of the movies contained pro-tobacco messages.

The movies also received a “C” for who smoked on film, because 52 percent of the movies contained a lead actor who smoked.

The movies got their worst rating, a “D-,” for the extent and type of tobacco usage. The “average incidents per hour” had increased 38 percent from the previous year.

The review of movies began in 1991 and has now tallied over 550 movies reviewed for tobacco use. The “Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down!” project is funded by a grant from the Tobacco Health Protection Act of 1988.

The American Legacy Foundation, dedicated to ending tobacco use, also used the occasion of World No Tobacco Day’s focus on the movies to release [a new study](#) assessing tobacco use in films.

Cheryl Heaton, ALF's president and CEO, called on the film industry to investigate whether Big Tobacco was working to place tobacco use in movie trailers on television. She said such activity would constitute "de facto tobacco advertising," according to a press release, which would violate advertising restrictions placed on Big Tobacco as a result of the Master Settlement Agreement.

The MSA was reached by attorneys general of 46 states and the tobacco industry in 1998. The MSA called for limits on Big Tobacco advertising, and funding for tobacco prevention and control. ALF was created as a result.

ALFs' review of tobacco in movies and their trailers found that smoking occurred in 85 percent of R-rated movies, 64 percent of PG-13-rated movies and 37 percent of PG-rated movies.

The ALA of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails has gone beyond the annual "Hackademy Awards" and report cards to launch a Web site called SceneSmoking.com. The site reviews current releases for their tobacco use and assigns each a "lung rating" of pink, light grey, dark grey and black.

From May 2002 to May 2003, the site found that 82 percent of PG-13 films contained tobacco use, whereas 76 percent of R-rated films showed tobacco, Mitchell said.

Dr. Stanton A. Glantz, professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, heads the [Smoke Free Movies](http://SmokeFreeMovies.com) campaign. The campaign recently took out ads at the Cannes Film Festival, in the *New York Times* and in the Hollywood trade publication *Variety*.

"The film industry must stop promoting tobacco immediately," read part of [one of the ads](#). "Or else, as happened to the tobacco industry, moral culpability will become legal liability."

The campaign has been snowballing, Glantz told EthicsDaily.com.

“It’s engaged the public, and it’s engaged a lot of people all over the world on this issue,” he said, noting that Web site traffic and media attention have been steadily growing. Furthermore, his Center for Tobacco Control, Research and Education has just been named a WHO collaborating center.

“The wind is blowing in our direction pretty strong,” he said.

Glantz’s campaign has developed four measures—endorsed by WHO, ALF and other groups—it would like to see the film industry embrace:

- certify, via a film’s closing credits, that no one involved in the film received anything of value for promoting tobacco;
- preface all tobacco-use films with strong anti-smoking ads;
- stop identifying tobacco brands in the movies;
- and give movies with tobacco use an R rating.

Glantz said getting the R rating for tobacco use is the most important.

“The more kids see, the more likely they are to smoke,” he said. The R rating, he believes, would cut kids’ exposure to tobacco.

The ALA’s Mitchell agreed: “It’s easy access for our kids to see those movies, and we’re finding that tobacco use is in them.”

“Just put the label on there so that parents are aware that there’s smoking in this film,” she said. “It’s a very simple issue to put that on there.”

But Glantz still envisions a tough battle with Hollywood.

“The tobacco industry is still the dominant social and political force in Hollywood,” he said, adding that Hollywood and Washington are the only two places still welcoming Big Tobacco.

Glantz said the Hollywood establishment is “stonewalling” efforts to decrease tobacco exposure on film. But, he said the establishment has moved from “ridiculing” his efforts to “not talking.”

Because tobacco use is still caught on film, part of the defense—in addition to

changing policies—involves media literacy.

The Centers for Disease Control oversees an educational program called [Smoke Screeners](#), which aims to teach media literacy to youngsters in hopes that they will discern images of tobacco use they see in movies on television.

Smoke Screeners wants to help children see how smoking images are both normalized and glamorized—before it's too late.

“When young people begin experimenting with tobacco, they are vulnerable to addiction before they get the facts,” reads the Smoke Screeners packet. “And, once they make the decision to use tobacco, the habit can last a lifetime.”

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