

California Health Experts Fault State's \$100 Million Movie Subsidy, Ask for Reform

L.A. County's health chief and the chair of California's expert committee on tobacco control want future film projects with smoking made ineligible for millions in California tax credits

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 23, 2011 /PRNewswire/ -- Should California taxpayers invest millions of dollars to prevent youth smoking, then hand millions to studios whose films promote youth smoking?

That's the contradiction spotlighted in separate letters to the California Film Commission released today from Jonathan Fielding, MD, director of L.A. County's Department of Public Health, and Michael Ong, MD, chair of the Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee, which is mandated by the legislature to guide state tobacco prevention efforts.

Dr. Fielding's letter, dated January 14, notes that two recent Sony blockbusters, *The Social Network* and *Burlesque*, both rated PG-13 and featuring tobacco imagery, qualified for more than \$12 million in California tax credits through a \$100 million a year program that began its payouts on January 1, 2011. (The two films have grossed \$135 million so far.) "Any benefit that tobacco-related subsidies for films might have for California's interstate competitiveness must be balanced against proven, catastrophic 'collateral damage' to young audiences and long-term health costs to the state," the letter says.

Dr. Ong's letter, dated February 18, reports that "approximately 44 percent of adolescent smoking initiation can be attributed to exposure to onscreen smoking" and 100,000 high school students in California are currently smokers as a result of this exposure. "It is unconscionable that one state program threatens to undermine our state's public health achievements and goals, our investment in tobacco prevention, and our savings in health care costs, particularly in a time of declining state revenues," the letter says.

Both letters urge that future film projects with smoking be made ineligible for taxpayer subsidies in California. Similar reforms are advocated by health groups in New York, New Mexico, Ontario and British Columbia, all major sources of film production subsidies. In 2008, U.S. states granted an estimated \$500 million in production subsidies to youth-rated films with smoking, rivaling the \$518 million they will spend for tobacco prevention in 2011.

Also today, the Smoke Free Movies campaign based at University of California, San Francisco, published a full-page ad in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* noting that two-thirds of Oscar®-nominated films this year include smoking and forty percent of these are rated PG or PG-13. The ad centers on the new animated film *Rango* (Viacom: Paramount and Nickelodeon) opening March 4. Headline: "How many studio execs did it take to OK smoking in a 'PG' movie?" California already makes animated films ineligible for public subsidy. The ad can be seen at www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/ourads/index.html.

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