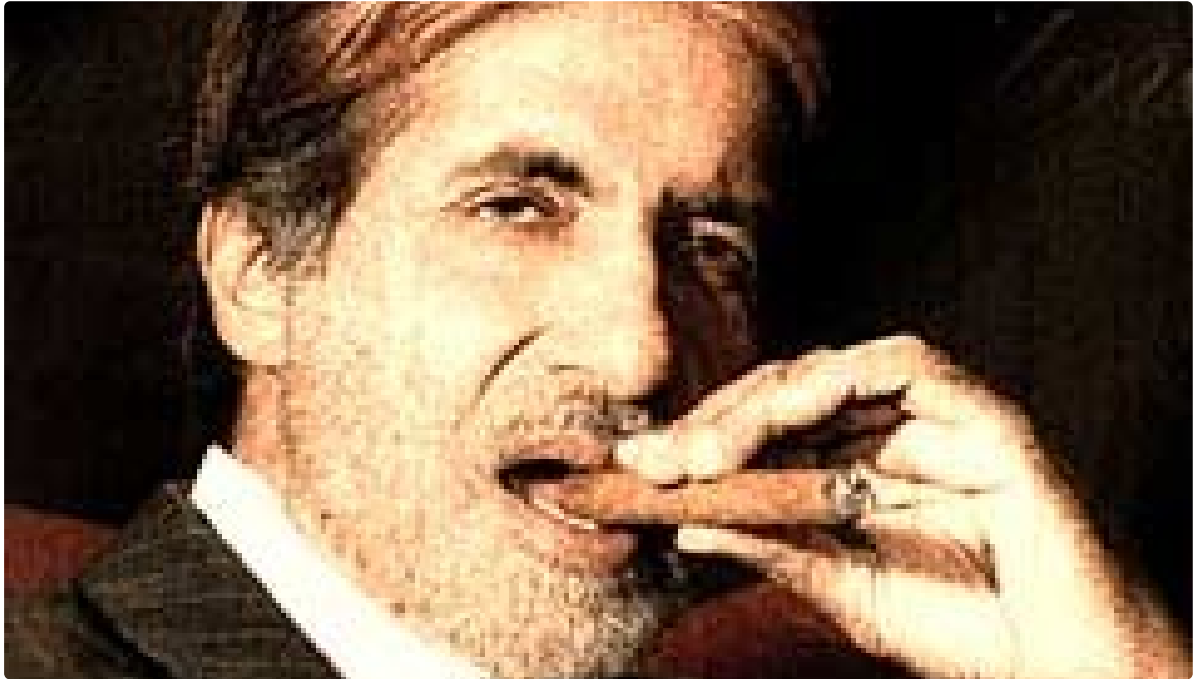


Keep tobacco out of movies: says Prof Rama Kant



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One of the easiest ways to significantly bring down number of children and youth who get initiated to tobacco use in Thailand, without any budgetary allocation for this public health exercise, is to remove depiction of tobacco use in films and TV, said International Awardee (2005) of World Health Organization (WHO) – Professor (Dr) Rama Kant, who is visiting Thailand to deliver keynote guest lecture at McCormick Hospital in Chiang Mai.

He pointed out freely available video CDs of movies in white and grey market in Thailand, which anyone can go and buy. Moreover with satellite television channels, it is becoming further tough to control tobacco promotion and promote health policies by country-level regulations alone. Many of these movies, including Hollywood and Indian cinema, portray tobacco use with brand placement in films.

Prof Rama Kant is a noted tobacco control advocate and has been spearheading a voluntary public health initiative since more than past 30 years.

One of the major influences on the uptake of teen tobacco use is the glamourisation of tobacco use in movies and on television. This has been well documented by comprehensive research studies in India and US.

Dartmouth Medical School, National Cancer Institute USA and American Legacy Foundation report, titled "First Look Report, Trends in Top Box Office Movie Tobacco use - 1996-2004". This report has an exhaustive content analysis of top 100 box office movie hits each year for nine years duration (1996-2004). This report confirms that smoking continues to be depicted in nearly three-quarters of movies. Two studies conducted earlier by the Dartmouth Medical School found that one-third to one-half of youth smoking initiation is explained by exposure to smoking in movies.

Similar study done by World Health Organization and Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 2003 revealed that 76% of Indian movies had tobacco use shown in them. In 1991, where 22% of top box office movie hits had lead characters using tobacco on-screen, in 2002, this escalated to 53% tobacco use depiction by lead characters in Indian movies. This study also demonstrated that 52.2% of children in India who had their first smoke were influenced by tobacco use depicted in movies.

A repeat follow-up study conducted by WHO and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India on top box office movie hits during 2004-2005 demonstrated that tobacco use depiction in movies has become more aggressive as compared to previous years. During 2004-2005, 89% of all movies analyzed contained tobacco use on screen and 75.5% movies depicted leading stars using tobacco on screen. Moreover 41% of movies screened had clear and distinct tobacco brand placement. Not surprising, that 33.7% of youth respondents could recall brand use in films too.

Prof Rama Kant said categorically that stopping depiction of tobacco use in films is an evidence based public health measure.

Indian Health Minister Dr Ambumani Ramadoss had earlier said on record that "film and tobacco industry are hands-in-glove involved" and suggested big pay-offs too. Dr Ramadoss' proposal to ban tobacco use in movies and TV was vehemently opposed by film industry.

Exposure to tobacco use in movies is clearly linked to youth tobacco use. Simply put, more must be done to ensure that tobacco use in movies is removed from films seen by our nation's youth. We have within our power one simple and effective way to jump start the decline in youth

tobacco use - delete tobacco use in films from the list of influences that rob our youth of longer and healthier lives by removing tobacco use from movies, unless they clearly depict the negative health effects. Together we can ensure that movies continue to entertain and inspire our children and youth, and at the same time, save countless lives from tobacco addiction and premature death.

Bobby Ramakant

editor

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