COVERT TOBACCO ADVERTISING: GOVERNMENT MUST ACT NOW

In the lead up to World No Tobacco Day 2004, the Australian Democrats call on the Federal Government to take action on the covert cigarette advertising that is becoming increasingly prominent in films aimed at young people.

"Tobacco companies are paying millions of dollars to have smoking featured in films in an attempt to glamorise the habit and hook young people. Sadly, it’s working," Democrat's health spokesperson Senator Lyn Allison said today.

According to research published in the Lancet, adolescents exposed to film smoking are almost 3 times more likely to smoke, and the younger they start, the quicker they are likely to become addicted and the more heavily they will smoke.

"Smoking in films is not a new event but is at its highest rate in fifty years. In Mona Lisa’s Smile, a recent film aimed at young people, every four minutes (on average) a young actress is shown smoking, talking excitedly about smoking, or displaying a pack of cigarettes.

"Smoking in films is much more prevalent than in real life. Young people are influenced by the smoking behaviour of their favourite stars, both on and off the screen. Watching movies that portray smoking as an acceptable, normal, and natural and even fun behaviour increases the likelihood that young people will light up".

Every year thousands of young Australians take up smoking and over 1/3 of those will go on to die from smoking related diseases. Smoking continues to be one of the leading preventable causes of death and disease in Australia and has been estimated to cost the Australian public over $670 million a year in hospital and medical expenses alone.

"This Government continues to do little to prevent people from taking up smoking. A 2004 review in the British Medical Journal concluded that banning indirect tobacco advertising such as sports sponsorship and product placement in films is as important as ending direct advertising.

"The Democrats have introduced legislation into the Senate that would ban inducements for tobacco product placement in films, ban deceptive cigarette terms like menthol, low tar, mild and light, and prohibit the sale of tobacco products on the Internet".

Senator Allison called on the Government to take a leadership position on this issue and to spend some of the $5 billion a year they receive in tobacco excise on anti-smoking programs and taking action to recover the huge smoking related health costs.

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