

Letters to the Editor

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Current Trends in Tobacco Use on Prime-Time Fictional Television

When smoking is presented as normative behavior children are more likely to overestimate the prevalence of smoking, which might increase their predisposition toward smoking.¹ Since children watch

television, we examined tobacco use on television.

A random sample of three composite weeks of fall 1992 prime-time programming on ABC, CBS, and NBC was constructed.² All tobacco events, including anti-smoking messages, were coded. We recorded 189 viewing hours, encompassing 230 programs; 73 programs were deleted without replacement because they were sports, news magazine, or other regular nonfiction programming. The final sample included 157 programs, spanning 111 hours.

Twenty-four percent of the programs contained at least one tobacco event, with no significant differences among the networks. There were 110 tobacco events in the 157 programs. Of these, 101 events (92%) were pro-tobacco. Only 9 (8%) of the events were anti-smoking messages. Overall, 0.99 tobacco events occurred per television hour. Drama programs included 1.13 tobacco events per hour and comedies included 0.86 events per hour.

More than three times as many acts of smoking were performed by males as by females (65% vs 21%, $P < .001$). Whites performed 78% and non-Whites per-

formed 7% of the smoking acts ($P < .001$). Middle-class smokers predominated (42%, compared with 26% who were rich and 14% who were poor; $P < .001$); 65% of smokers were employed in technical and professional jobs and 21% in service jobs ($P = .001$). Good-guy smokers outnumbered bad-guy smokers (55% vs 45%, $P < .001$). High-status role models (e.g., bankers) were more likely than persons of medium status (e.g., plumbers) or low status (e.g., homeless people) to smoke (44% vs 26% and 29%, respectively; $P < .001$).

We compared these results with the results of our study of smoking in movies.³ Twenty-four percent of television programs depicted tobacco-related events in our 1992 study, compared with 90% of movies between 1960 and 1991 ($P < .001$). Many smoker-related variables were similar. Characters who were movie actors accounted for 26% of the smoking events on television, compared with 32% in movies ($P = .30$). Most smokers were males, both on television and in the movies (72% vs 65%, $P = .20$). There was not a great difference in the socioeconomic status of smokers in the movies and on television; middle-class smokers predominated. Smokers were portrayed in technical and professional occupations more on television than in movies (65% vs 52%, $P < .01$). The high rates of smoking in both media overrepresent real-life smoking. Most of the role models both on television and in the movies are high-achieving, White men in their productive years. The more high-profile, glamorized characters are more likely to be copied by children.⁴

Table 1 compares our results with earlier studies.⁵⁻⁹ This comparison suggests that smoking on television, after years of declining, may now be on the rise. □

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TABLE 1—Tobacco Events per Hour on Prime-Time Television Over Time

| Year(s) | Comedies | Dramas | Overall | Reference |
|-----------|----------|--------|-------------------|------------|
| 1950–1963 | 0.78 | 4.25 | 2.21 | 6 |
| 1964–1970 | 0.26 | 2.43 | 1.22 | 6 |
| 1971–1977 | 0.08 | 0.70 | 0.45 | 6 |
| 1973 | 0.38 | 0.44 | ... | 7 |
| 1976–1978 | ... | ... | 0.59 ^b | 5 |
| 1981–1982 | 0.13 | 0.35 | 0.24 | 6 |
| 1984 | 0.36 | 0.96 | 0.87 | 8 |
| 1993 | 0.46 | 1.20 | 0.70 | This study |

^aNo hourly data for overall rate.

^bOverall rate only.

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Use of Smokeless Tobacco in the World Series, 1986 through 1993

In 1986, I was the first to monitor on television the visible use of smokeless tobacco during a baseball game, the fifth game of the World Series.¹ In that game, I recorded 23 minutes and 55 seconds of perceptible use of tobacco by players and coaches.

As noted in 1986, the policy governing the use of smokeless tobacco was in sharp contrast to the policy with respect to cigarette tobacco. Baseball players do not smoke on the field or in the dugout. Pitchers don't smoke on the mound, nor do hitters peer over the smoke of a cigarette while in a batting stance. Yet

TABLE 1—Total Minutes of Perceptible, On-Camera Smokeless Tobacco Use during a World Series Game, 1986 through 1993

| World Series | On-Camera Smokeless Tobacco Use, Total Minutes | Source |
|--------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1986, Mets vs Red Sox | 23.9 | Jones ¹ |
| 1987, Cardinals vs Twins | 11.8 | Jones |
| 1988, Dodgers vs A's | 3.8 | Sussman and Barovich ⁶ |
| 1989, Giants vs A's | 7.7 | Jones |
| 1990, Reds vs A's | 7.3 | Jones |
| 1991, Braves vs Twins | 9.3 | Jones |
| 1992, Braves vs Jays | 3.5 | Jones |
| 1993, Phillies vs Jays | 20.8 | Jones |

snuff and chewing tobacco continue to be used in full view of the camera throughout the course of major league baseball games.

Since 1986, organized efforts have been undertaken to educate baseball players, managers, and coaches to avoid or quit using smokeless tobacco; teams to discontinue free distribution of products; and league officials to change policy.²⁻⁵ However, major league policy on smokeless tobacco products has not changed.

I and others have continued to monitor a World Series game annually from 1986 through 1993 (Table 1). The general trend from 1986 through 1992 was a reduction in use. Sussman and Barovich theorized that ballplayers were discouraged from displaying the use of smokeless products.⁶ However, use was up markedly in 1993. The 20.8 minutes of use in the 1993 World Series was three times the average use of the last 6 years. This increase is most disappointing after recent minor league bans and years of effort toward player education, prevention, and cessation.

Smokeless tobacco use by several key players or managers may greatly affect the total perceptible use. The increase in 1993 was primarily attributed to the viewing of two players and a manager. Outfielder Len Dykstra and manager Jim Fregosi of the Philadelphia Phillies and Pat Borders, the Toronto Blue Jays' catcher, were heavy users. Dykstra and Borders continually used their uniforms to wipe away tobacco-stained saliva on camera. Fregosi's package of Red Man was visible in the dugout. Five additional players (including Series MVP [most valuable player] Paul Molitor) and one coach contributed to the total of 20.8 minutes.

In the 1987 game, two players (the Minnesota Twins' first baseman Kent Hrbek and the St. Louis Cardinals' catcher Tony Pena) and the two managers (the

Twins' Tom Kelly and the Cardinals' Whitey Herzog) were heavy visible users of tobacco. These four individuals accounted for 75% of the visible use, although six other players and one coach were observed using tobacco. A tobacco-using pitcher or a manager in late innings of a close game will usually receive extensive close-up camera time.

Regular season games have heavy tobacco use as well. During a 1993 game televised by ESPN, the announcer told the story of the pitcher's father calling his son after watching him pitch in a previous game shown on television. The father had some advice for his son on how to improve his pitching delivery. His father said he was unable to see his son's round tin of snuff in his back pocket when he threw a pitch. He needed "to show the catcher his Skoal" by rotating more on his delivery. This story was followed by a camera close-up of the tin of snuff in the pitcher's pocket as he leaned over on the mound to get the sign for the next pitch. (A number of baseball cards each year show tobacco use as well, often with tins of snuff showing in players' pockets.)

Most of organized baseball, including Little League, high school baseball, collegiate baseball, and the minor professional leagues, have banned the use of smokeless tobacco. However, millions of young people still see major league baseball players—role models—using highly addictive and carcinogenic smokeless tobacco products on television, on baseball cards, and in person. It is time to make baseball smokeless-free in 1995. □

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