

November 26, 2020

The Honourable Rod Phillips
Finance Minister of Ontario
Ministry of Finance
Frost Building South, 7th Floor
7 Queens Park Cres.
Toronto, ON

Re: **Comments on the Film Content Information Act 2020 (part of Schedule 12 to the Budget implementation bill, Bill 229, the Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures), 2020).**

I am writing to express my concern about the *Film Content Information Act, 2020* (FCIA) contained in Schedule 12 of the government's Budget implementation Bill 229.

There is a public health risk when young people view movies with adult content and behaviours. From years of research in Ontario¹, we know that movies and films are powerful tools for promoting tobacco use. A substantial body of scientific evidence indicates that exposure to smoking in movies is a cause of smoking initiation and progression to regular smoking among youth.ⁱ The tobacco industry has spent millions of dollars to develop and maintain the portrayal of smoking in films. Tobacco companies have paid film producers to feature specific tobacco brands and funded advertising campaigns for film studios' latest films and their top stars.² The role of films as vehicles to promote smoking has become even more important as other forms of tobacco promotion are constrained.²

As per the attached report to Lambton County Council, youth exposure to tobacco products onscreen has been an ongoing issue in our community. The Ontario Tobacco Research Unit (OTRU) studied the extent of the exposure and impact in Ontario and estimates that:

- **185,000** Ontario children and teens alive today **will start smoking** because of exposure to onscreen smoking in movies.
- Over the lifetime of those smokers recruited to smoking by their exposure to onscreen smoking, at least \$1.1 billion in tobacco-related healthcare costs will be incurred.
- Approximately **59,000** of those recruited to smoking by exposure to tobacco imagery in movies **will die prematurely** from smoking-related disease.
- It is projected that applying an 18A rating for smoking in movies released in Ontario would avert at least 95,000 Ontario children and teens from becoming smokers, **prevent more than 30,000 future tobacco deaths, and save more than half a billion dollars** in tobacco-related healthcare costs.

By adding to the overall health burden and its associated costs, the *FCIA* constitutes a significant step backwards in Ontario when it comes to protecting Ontario children from the harmful effects of dangerous on-screen impressions.

Specific concerns:

Section 4(1)(1) appears to state that it is the exhibitor who reasonably determines what information about the film and its contents would be relevant to persons who may intend to view the film. **This means that movies with smoking, drug use and/or any number of behaviours damaging to public health may be shown with no warnings or qualification.**

Section 4(2)(2) only provides “*examples*” of information that could be included in content information. It does not require the disclosure of these items but offers them as merely an example of the kind of information the exhibitor might “*reasonably determine*” is relevant. **Parents will be unable to rely on film labels to make informed viewing decisions with and for their children.** This approach is especially concerning when films contains imagery that has been proven to increase the risk of a young person emulating a behaviour or using a product that has serious implications for their health and that may lead to premature death.

Section 4(2)(1) removes the former age classifications that were assigned to films based on content. **Removing the age rating system means that films with adult content such as violence or tobacco use will not receive a rating and therefore will not be restricted to adult audiences,** thus posing further risk to youth of normalizing behaviours that are potentially harmful to them.

I recommend the provincial government consider:

- Amending the FCIA to require that film content information is provided consistently using all the current indicators under the FCA such as coarse language, violence, and substance use (including to tobacco product use and vaping);
- Convening a group of scientific and public health experts to develop an evidence-based list of content that would be required to be disclosed about every film; and
- Establishing a consultation process to evaluate of an age-based rating system as opposed to the proposed information disclosures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how intertwined health is with all other sectors of society. This makes it that much more important to embed principles of health in the actions undertaken by other sectors. There are significant health implications to the proposed replacement of the former classification system with the looser requirements of the *Film Content Information Act, 2020* (FCIA). The public deserves to be informed about movie content, to make informed viewing choices for themselves and their children. And there is significant evidence that movies clearly influence the behavior of children and youth and can lead to dangerous and life-threatening consequences. Please consider these consequences in your policy decisions around this issue, starting with the recommendations I have proposed.

Sincerely,



Dr. S. Ranade
Medical Officer of Health
County of Lambton

CC: Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Honourable Christine Elliott, Minister of Health and Deputy Premier of Ontario
Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Government and Consumer Services
Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

1. *Youth Exposure to Tobacco in Movies in Ontario, Canada: 2002-2018*. Ontario Tobacco Research Unit, Toronto, 2019.

2. World Health Organization; Smoke Free Movies: From Evidence to Action, 2016
*****apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/190165/1/9789241509596_eng.pdf?ua=1