Yawn of the Dead (A Reflection on Smoking)

By ACSH Staff — September 28, 2004

*Shaun of the Dead* [1], the funniest movie of the year so far (since the momentous marionette parody *Team America* [2] has not yet opened), depicts a boring, underachieving British man named Shaun going on with his humdrum life, oblivious to the monstrous army of the walking dead that is taking over the world all around him. The juxtapositions as he walks to the local store, mere inches from grasping zombie arms, or smokes and drinks at the local pub, overlooking news reports about the end of the world, are chilling and hilarious.

And I can't help thinking it's a lot like most people's attitude toward cigarettes.

Some 400,000 Americans are dropping like flies all around us each year from the diverse negative health effects of smoking, and still more are impaired without being killed, yet most of us go calmly about our business -- and there are very few of us whose business is the health effects of smoking. Of course, there is some good news: though far too many people smoke, rates are lower than they were decades ago (as American Council on Science and Health president Dr. Elizabeth Whelan noted in a letter to *The Lancet*, "in 1964 nearly 53% of men and 32% of women in the U.S. reported themselves as current smokers -- the comparable percentages now are 26% and 21%, respectively, so significant progress has been made"); a Rand Corporation study shows black youth are less likely to smoke than the general population, which might yet hold some useful lessons about what cultural nuances encourage smoking; and new methods for quitting continue to be developed.

But mass death is still an all-too-easily accepted norm. *Jane* magazine, not exactly known for dispensing wise counsel, even printed an article recently titled "Yet Another Great Reason to Keep on Smoking!" discouraging female smokers from quitting on the grounds that they might experience minor weight gain (which beats lung cancer, and can be avoided by simply eating less). As a culture, we're still pretty apathetic about the whole issue. Argue with a some smokers about the risks they're facing -- an average of something like seven years of life lost per smoker -- and they'll tell you it doesn't strike them as that dire or immediate a risk, especially if they're young.
But keep in mind that almost nothing else in life exacts a toll of smoking's magnitude. In the abstract -- especially if one chooses not to dwell on the issue, which is a mistake, albeit a predictable one -- dying at, say, seventy-three instead of eighty may not strike some young people as that terrible a thing. Keep in mind that seven years is just an average, though -- for some the numbers are worse -- and remember that smoking is not, after all, life's only risk. Would you ever seriously consider taking on, say, five or six risks of that magnitude? Shortening your life by an average of, say, thirty-five or forty-two years? Most of the people reading this article would probably be dead already if they casually accepted multiple risks of that sort. So in some perverse sense, we're lucky smoking is in a class all its own as a dangerously bad habit.

I noted in an article last year that the rock star Robert Palmer was generally thought of as a fairly well-behaved rock star -- yet his addiction to cigarettes may well have contributed to his death from a heart attack in his fifties, since fatal heart attacks in middle age are about twice as likely in smokers. I noted my worry in that article that an even more prominent British rocker, David Bowie, had smoked for decades -- and Bowie indeed suffered a heart attack in his fifties earlier this year (and lived, fortunately -- he has also reportedly quit smoking). We get so accustomed to noticing spectacular bad behavior by rock stars -- drug overdoses, smashed hotel rooms -- that the boring habits even more likely to kill them slip under our radar.

"It's not the end of the world," Shaun's best friend naively tells Shaun after they hear some bad news near the beginning of Shaun of the Dead. The audience reacts with a mixture of laughter and fear. And perhaps (rudeness aside) we should react in a similar fashion when people say "I don't have many bad habits -- just smoking."

To help people -- particularly teens, who are the most likely segment of the population to start smoking these days -- understand the real range of terrible health consequences smoking brings, we at the American Council on Science and Health have launched a new website -- http://TheScooponSmoking.org -- which details smoking's devastating effects not just on lungs but on virtually every system in the body. The site also has stories from teen smokers and suggestions for people seeking help in quitting. (I think the site is a good example of what ACSH does best, by the way, which is informing people so they can make wise decisions, while others in the anti-tobacco movement often get bogged down in in-fighting over how to craft anti-smoking regulations -- indeed, one critic even theorized recently that ACSH might secretly be a tobacco industry "stooge," and I suspect he'll be too busy fighting imaginary conspiracies online to read our new site or encourage teens to do so.)

Like a zombie movie, the gruesome details of smoking, from weakened hearts to wrinkled skin, hold a certain morbid fascination. Simply telling people it's "bad" isn't as useful as giving them the detailed medical facts and letting them know their odds of suffering ill effects. Check out the site and avoid joining the legions of the dead.

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