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Jeffrey Wigand: Why 'The Insider' welcomes the smoking ban

In the mid-1990s Jeffrey Wigand exposed how his then employer, a tobacco company, was suppressing details of the damage done by nicotine. In the film of his story 'The Insider', he was played by Russell Crowe

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Rights. Duties. Freedom. Justice. These words signify moral values that transcend time and place, culture and custom. And these values are the very values that can be compromised if cities, states and nations do not develop policies and laws aimed at mitigating the harm caused by tobacco. To take but one example, we believe that without full and complete information, a person cannot be said to make a free, voluntary and conscious choice. So, if a person's decision to use tobacco products is to be free, voluntary and conscious, laws that mandate disclosure of the additives (which alarmingly include ammonia and acetone) in these products are essential. This example demonstrates that tobacco control laws are essential to preserving freedom and autonomy.

Ironically, opponents of tobacco control laws argue that they actually infringe upon our "rights". "A smoking ban is an unjust infringement on my rights!" is a typical complaint. Put bluntly, no. When a behaviour is harmful to others, we do not have a right to engage in that behaviour. We have the right to consume alcohol if we are of the required age, but we do not have the right to drive when we are drunk. Our rights end when we engage in activities that harm others.

Second-hand smoke, also known as "ETS" (environmental tobacco smoke), is demonstrably harmful. Classed as a class A carcinogen, ETS belongs to the same group of carcinogens as asbestos, arsenic, radon and hexavalent chromium (the dangers of the last of these were brought to the public's attention in the film *Erin Brockovich*). ETS is a known cause of cardiovascular disease, lung cancer and respiratory illnesses such as asthma and bronchitis. It also has significant effects on those who spend much of their time in a smoke-filled environment. ETS clearly harms others. Therefore people do not have the right to engage in an activity that causes ETS. It is this insight that has led countless cities, states and nations to ban smoking in public places. Soon England will join the list of locales that have banned smoking in enclosed public spaces. Like Ireland, Malta and Norway, the United Kingdom recognises its duty to develop laws and policies that protect innocents from undue harm.

Unfortunately, England's law, like too many others, ignores an important group of innocents who deserve protection from the harms of tobacco: children. What of the child who is exposed to countless hours of ETS in her home? How will she be protected?

Opponents of such laws put forth principles such as "the Government has no right to tell me what to do in my own home". Again, no. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument implies that the Government would be unjustified in preventing us from using asbestos in our homes, which, of course, is an absurdity. The tobacco industry has had great success in normalising its product. It has convinced some that smoking is a glamorous, sexy and natural activity in which we have a right to engage.

Smokers need to realise that their behaviour is harmful to others, and that this is the reason and rationale for bans on smoking. Governments have an obligation to protect the health of innocents, and individuals have an obligation to refrain from activities that cause harm to others. England's new law is a welcome first step in protecting innocents from undue harm caused by tobacco products, but it should by no means be the last.

Further viewing: See Russell Crowe and Al Pacino in 'The Insider' which is available on DVD

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