

Public Health at the Movies: A Selection of 35 Top Movies

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We have assembled a collection of 35 high quality movies as part of public health teaching for medical students. In this blog post we detail the movies and reflect on some of the aspects that make them both educational and entertaining.

A systematic selection process was used for generating the initial batch of movies, though in the last few years additions have been more opportunistic. Nevertheless, all the movies cover public health issues and also achieve a minimum level of entertainment value. That is, nearly all have a score of at least 7 out of 10 on the movie website "[Rotten Tomatoes](#)". DVDs of all these movies have been made freely available to students and staff from our medical school library (University of Otago, Wellington) and the medical students have a semi-structured classroom session involving those movies they self-selected for viewing (for details on the teaching aspects see these publications: (1-4). However, members of the public can find nearly all these movies at DVD rental outlets and websites that have online payments for viewing.

Movies on infectious diseases and pandemics

These movies include [And the Band Played On](#) (1993), [Contagion](#) (2011), [How to Survive a Plague](#) (2012), [Milk](#) (2008), and [Miss Evers' Boys](#) (1997). Despite being made in 1993, [And the Band Played On](#) remains a great movie and it shows many of the important aspects of how a society grapples with an emerging disease (i.e., the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States). And relating to this same epidemic is the much more recent [How to Survive a Plague](#). It vividly shows the power of well organised citizens in speeding up the response by government agencies and the pharmaceutical industry to making new treatments available. It is one of the most inspiring movies in the collection.

Nutrition and food systems

With the obesity epidemic and the high burden of non-communicable diseases globally, movies on nutrition and food systems are very relevant. They include: [Fed Up](#) (2014), [Food, Inc.](#) (2008), [King Corn](#) (2007), and [Super Size Me](#) (2004). The most informative documentaries are [Fed Up](#) and [Food, Inc.](#) but [Super Size Me](#) is certainly the most entertaining movie on this topic (albeit in a somewhat absurd way).

Climate change and energy

Climate change is a key international health issue and the selected movies on this theme include [Carbon Nation](#) (2010), [Chasing Ice](#) (2012), [Climate Change](#) (2006), [Hot Air](#) (2014), [An Inconvenient Truth](#) (2006), and [Who Killed the Electric Car?](#) (2006). From a NZ perspective on the topic, [Hot Air](#) is very informative with a wide range of local interviewees. Also informative, and with a lot of really spectacular photography, is [Chasing Ice](#). Yet a favourite in this group is the “who done it” style documentary [Who Killed the Electric Car?](#) This cleverly explores the different players in how the roll out of the electric car in California was stymied.

Healthcare systems

These movies include [Stories of Doctors Without Borders](#) (2008) which is about Doctors working for MSF in Africa, and the much more polemic (but still insightful) [Michael Moore](#) movie, [Sicko](#) (2007).

Tobacco control

The classic movie about the tobacco industry is [The Insider](#) (1999). A much more quirky – but still fascinating movie is [Bright Leaves](#) (2004). It also addresses some of the societal dependence on tobacco farming.

Public policy / corporate power

Movies exploring these themes include: [Amazing Grace](#) (2006), [Bowling for Columbine](#) (2002), [The Corporation](#) (2004), and [The Yes Men](#) (2004). The latter is the most amusing, while [Amazing Grace](#) dramatically shows the long process around achieving a major social justice goal: the abolition of slavery.

Environmental health

These movies include [A Civil Action](#) (1998), [Erin Brockovich](#) (2000), [Michael Clayton](#) (2007) and [The Cove](#) (2009). The first three of these are dramas with star actors (Travolta, Roberts and Clooney respectively) while [The Cove](#) is a documentary on the routine killing of dolphins (with provision of dolphin meat that is contaminated with mercury).

Developing countries

Movies on this topic include [Born into Brothels](#) (2004), [The Constant Gardener](#) (2005), [Darwin's Nightmare](#) (2004), [The Motorcycle Diaries](#) (2004), [Workingman's Death](#) (2005). The latter shows how incredibly tough some working conditions can be in some developing countries – though many of the lives in [Darwin's Nightmare](#) are also particularly grim. More uplifting are some of the positive outcomes in [Born into Brothels](#) and [The Motorcycle Diaries](#).

Other topics

And to finish off the collection a range of other movies cover the themes of homelessness: [Dark Days](#) (2000); illicit drug policy: [Traffic](#) (2000); and nuclear disarmament: [Countdown to Zero](#) (2010). This last movie reminds us of the persisting threat from these weapons that continue in the arsenals of nine countries – often with on-going processes of modernisation and expansion.

The links to the movies in this blog post provide more detail of the public health themes in them and links to more detailed descriptions (eg, Wikipedia sites) and movie trailers on YouTube. If you are tempted to check some out – we suspect you will find them both interesting and entertaining.

References

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