30 January 2020

Mr Jian Yang MP  
Chair of the Governance and Administration Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington

By email: qa@parliament.govt.nz

Tēnā koe Mr Yang MP

Re: Films, Videos, and Publications Classification (Commercial Video on-Demand) Amendment Bill

Introduction

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the proposed amendments to Films, Videos, and Publications Classification (Commercial Video on-Demand) Bill.

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that prepares doctors to be medical specialists in the field of psychiatry and addiction, supports and enhances clinical practice, advocates for people affected by mental illness and advises government on mental health care.

The Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry is a specialty within the RANZCP that promotes the highest standards in clinical practice, training and research pertaining to child and adolescent psychiatry.

Child and adolescent psychiatry addresses mental health problems experienced by infants, children, adolescents and their whānau. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are committed to the benefits of early intervention and prevention by integrating biological, psychological and social aspects of individual, whānau and community experiences.¹

Overview

The RANZCP notes that the purpose of this Bill is to reduce the potential harm to consumers from viewing inappropriate, on-demand video content e.g. Netflix. We maintain that children and young people may be unintentionally exposed to harmful materials if there are not clear and consistent ratings applied to commercial video on demand (CVoD).

We support the principles outlined in the amendment that seeks to provide the consumer with more information regarding the rating of the commercial video on demand (CVoD). We are concerned that some CVoDs were not rated and that in some cases the rating system appears inconsistent. We support the proposal that all online on–demand videos are subjected to a mandatory rating as outlined in the current Bill.
We support the updated functions of the Office of Film and Literature Classification (Classification Office) to develop an online rating tool and self-rating system for specified CVoD providers. We would anticipate that the Classification Office is adequately resourced to review and monitor the rating tools and ensure the labelling process is well managed to ensure children and youth are not exposed to inappropriate material.

**The Link Between Exposure to Harmful Materials and Poor Mental Health Outcomes**

Child and adolescent psychiatrists are experts in the behavioural and psychological development of young people. Promoting the emotional wellbeing of young people is a critical element in our practice and we contend that exposing young people to harmful materials is detrimental to their wellbeing throughout their life course e.g. often adult psychological problems can be traced back to childhood experiences.

Young people do not have the emotional and behavioural ability to process information about the world with the same capacity as adults. For example, they may confuse fiction with reality. As a result, children are a vulnerable group. Because of this vulnerability, it is advisable that children are not exposed to violent, sexual or traumatic images that may cause them distress.

The research indicates that 'premature exposure to adult sexual images and values has a negative impact on the psychological development of children, particularly on self-esteem, body image and understanding of sexuality and relationships.'

The RANZCP notes a recent report, *Breaking Down Porn,* found many young New Zealanders are watching videos that have pornographic and violent content. The Office of the Children’s Commission has stated that ‘serious harm’ is being done to young New Zealanders as a consequence of this access to pornography. We understand that young people can view adult materials via a range of social mediums and that CVoDs are but only one channel. However, setting standards for CVoD media content is a good start in protecting the wellbeing of young New Zealanders.

With regards to young people viewing harmful materials, the RANZCP notes that it is not only access to pornography that requires scrutiny. There are other graphic and confronting content (such as violence, torture, self-harm and suicide) that need to be moderated by robust rating systems.

Particular young populations appear to be more at risk of developing psychological problems arising from exposure to graphic or confronting content.

1. **Young people living with mental illness** are at a greater risk of developing adverse psychological outcomes from viewing inappropriate materials. Evidence suggests that one in seven children and adolescents experience some form of mental illness. Young people living with existing mental disorders such as suicidal ideation or eating disorders are vulnerable populations. The Netflix fictional drama ‘13 Reasons Why’ demonstrates how some children were traumatised by viewing a video series focusing on youth suicide. Such exposure may result in some young people imitating these tragic events.
Also in 2017, Netflix released another drama series, ‘To the Bone’, which psychiatrists described as “potentially risky to those who have anorexia and those who have not yet developed it”. Of concern in particular was the graphic images of emaciated body parts. The psychiatrists stated that the drama could trigger psychological issues for people with anorexia and therefore should come with appropriate warnings.¹⁰

Both these dramas could potentially have negative psychological impacts on young viewers, therefore we strongly advocate for clear ratings on all CVoDs allowing parents, care-givers and children to be well-informed of the CVoD’s content.

2. The RANZCP points to research demonstrating that young girls who are exposed to sexualised images in the media may go on to develop poor self-esteem. Young girls are unable to understand the women portrayed in the videos are created and not real.¹¹ However, girls still seek to meet that ‘ideal’ image and feel pressure to do so. This existing inconsistency between the real and the unreal impacts on the young girl’s wellbeing possibly resulting in ‘depression, impaired sexual development in adolescence and poor self-protective behaviours in adolescent relationships.”¹²

Conclusion

The RANZCP supports this legislation as it would contribute to improving children’s and young people’s psychological wellbeing. We note that young people living with mental illness and girls are particularly vulnerable to inappropriate messaging in adult CVoDs. CVoDs are only one channel where young people access information and entertainment but this proposed legislation will start the conversation about how we can better protect our young people from being exposed to harmful materials.

The RANZCP does not wish to provide an oral submission to the Governance and Administration Select Committee.

If you have any questions regarding this submission, please contact Rosemary Matthews, National Manager, New Zealand, on 04 472 7265 or by email Rosemary.Matthews@ranzcp.org.

Nāku, na

Dr Tanya Wright, FRANZCP
Chair, New Zealand Faculty Committee for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Dr Mark Lawrence, FRANZCP
Chair, Tu Te Akaaka Roa / New Zealand National Committee
References


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10 Ibid

11 What is porn doing to our teenagers? New Zealand Doctor, 25 September 2019.