



**Cessnock Family Support Service Inc.
Gambling Counselling Service**

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HUNTER COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING
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Gambling Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

Dear Commissioners

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in regard to the Productivity Commission's Gambling Inquiry.

I am writing on behalf of the Hunter Council on Problem Gambling, a group comprised of the four Gambling Help treatment services in the Hunter region of New South Wales. These four services are Cessnock Family Support Gambling Counselling Service, Lake Macquarie Financial and Gambling Counselling Service, Hunter Gambling Counselling Service (Mission Australia), and Wesley Newcastle City Mission. These four services each receive financial assistance from the New South Wales Government through the Responsible Gambling Fund.

This submission represents a collection of observations and thoughts stemming from our experience and contact with people affected by problem gambling in the Hunter.

Poker machines

- Our services support individuals with problems linked to a wide range of gambling "products", however the overwhelming majority seek support in regard to poker machines. Much of our work involves providing accurate information to clients in regard to how poker machines work, the odds of winning, the randomness of play. It is clear that many people with a gambling problem are caught up in the myths and false beliefs of what poker machines do and do not offer.

Suggestion: Venues housing poker machines should expand upon and broaden the information they currently provide in regard to poker machine play (eg, venues currently display sticker messages in regard to the odds of winning the jackpot).

Messages that highlight the randomness of play, and the fact that “the more you play, the more you pay” may act to challenge some of the myths and false beliefs that influence many gamblers. It would be valuable to provide such information in a variety of modes (eg, stickers, posters, brochures) and throughout a number of locations within the venue (eg, gaming area, on poker machines, restrooms, back of toilet doors).

- Many clients have said that they continued gambling above what they could afford because they “really wanted to get the feature”. Poker machines are essentially, currently, designed to encourage people to play for longer and to spend more money. Features such as “free” spins/games, hyperlink jackpots, and on some machines intermittent messages such as “*This must be your lucky day!*”, “*You’re a ‘reel’ winner!*”, and “*I’d like to see that again!*”, all have the purpose of encouraging the player to play (pay) for longer. In many instances, clients have said that they end up feeling in competition with the poker machine, and that they do not want to walk away until they’ve “won” (rather than stay within their limits of what they can afford).
Suggestion: Redesign of poker machines to decrease the free spin features, reduce the amount that free game wins are multiplied by, remove hyperlink jackpots, reduce maximum payout. Also ensure that the names of poker machines are neutral and non-suggestive, rather than suggestive such as “Treasure Chest”.
- We suggest that there should be more places/areas within Clubs and pubs in which patrons can sit away from the sight and sound of poker machines (essentially a ‘chill out’ zone).
- We suggest further research and development of warning/alert systems for inclusion in poker machines – for example, a way for the machine to intermittently provide a summary of the time and money the individual has spent on that machine or in that venue. Other areas for research and development may include a way for players to nominate their maximum spending prior to commencing play.
- The availability and ease of access to poker machines is a predominant factor in the development and maintenance of many gambling problems. Within this point, we wish to acknowledge the recent changes introduced in New South Wales in regard to the Local Impact Assessment (LIA) process, by which the impact of additional gaming machines in a local government area (LGA) will be assessed. Each LGA in New South Wales has now been classified into Bands 1, 2, or 3 based on its gaming machine density, gaming machine expenditure and Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) disadvantage score (*NSW Office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing*).

ATMs in gaming venues

- Many people’s gambling problem is exacerbated by the ease at which they can continue to access cash within the venue. Many problems spiral out of control when people begin to “chase their losses”, by continuing to gamble despite already spending above what they can afford or above the limit they had set for themselves. Many people say they have made several trips to the ATM within the venue to get “just another \$50, then just another \$50, and just one more \$50”.
Suggestion: Remove ATMs from within gambling venues, or lower the cash limit on withdrawals from within a venue, or set up a limit to how many times the one key-card can be used within a gaming venue on any single day.

Responsible gambling messages

- Much social benefit has come from recent anti-smoking and responsible drinking advertisements and awareness campaigns. We suggest further development and promotion of responsible gambling messages through similar awareness campaigns, highlighting that 1) problem gambling is an issue that affects many Australians, 2) here are some of the impacts of problem gambling, 3) if you gamble, here are some tips to stay safe and 'in control', 4) support is available if you feel you need it, and this is how you access it.
- Responsible gambling messages should encourage the individual to consider what impact their gambling may be having on a number of areas of their life, including financial, family, relationships, work, stress, mental well being. It should also be highlighted that for some people, responsible gambling may mean not gambling at all.

Advertising gambling "products"

- Much of the current advertising of gambling "products" uses language that encourages the individual to play, without providing the balance of information relating to the odds of play or responsible gambling. For example, Lotto advertisements are known to sprout messages such as "You've got to be in it to win it", "You could spend the rest of your life", "Scratch me happy", yet do not provide a balance of information relating to safe and responsible use of their "product".

Suggestion: Stronger regulation of gambling advertisements to protect against the use of misleading language and ensure the inclusion of responsible gambling messages. Importantly, responsible gambling messages should be more than fine print at the bottom of the screen / poster / ticket; they should be a clear part of the message that the person takes away from the advertisement.

Treatment services

- The counselling and support that our services provide to people affected by problem gambling, allows us to put faces to the published statistics, and allows for their voices to be heard. Each one has a story. Each person we see has been confronted by numerous challenges. Amongst the problem gambling population there is a high risk of suicide, depression and other mental health issues. Many problem gamblers identify as being survivors of childhood trauma and abuse. Their gambling addiction maintains a cycle of financial strain, stress, relationship breakdown, isolation, and shame. Problem gambling is a complex issue, with many factors contributing to and stemming from the gambling behaviour.

Suggestion: To effectively tackle the issue of problem gambling in Australia, it is vital that there is a continued commitment to fund counselling support and other treatment services:

- *increased funding will broaden the scope of what services can provide, and would support skilled and experienced workers to stay within the sector*
- *increased promotion of gambling treatment services would act to break down some of the shame associated with problem gambling, and would support those effected to seek support*
- *there is a need for accessible and affordable residential rehabilitation facilities for gamblers*

Venue responsibility and accountability

- We wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution many Clubs make to community groups and activities. However, we suggest that *all gambling venues* (Clubs, pubs, TAB agencies) should be directed to contribute part of their gambling revenue to their *local* gambling treatment services as an acknowledgment of where this revenue comes from, and also to demonstrate recognition of problem gambling as a serious issue affecting our communities.
- Occasions of contact with the local gambling industry (eg, Club and hotel managers, venue staff) have suggested that there is an attitude amongst some in the industry that gambling treatment services are a threat to their business and revenue. This leads us to wonder if the responsibility, awareness and commitment for responsible gambling practices is truly being communicated, supported, and displayed by all staff within gambling venues.
- Gambling venues should be held accountable for ensuring that they provide accurate information to patrons to ensure that they are best able to make an informed choice about their gambling. This includes ensuring that information about local gambling treatment services is displayed and available so that patrons can also make an informed decision about seeking support if they wish to.

Ownership of the problem

- In many ways, problem gambling is an “invisible addiction”. People with a gambling problem are often hidden in the mass of recreational gamblers who are merely partaking in a popular, and readily accepted, aspect of “Australian culture”. This “invisibility” in itself adds to the development and maintenance of the problem. As long as gambling exists, there **will be** a percentage of people who have difficulty controlling their gambling behaviour. They are part of the “package”. They should not be separated and ostracised. They are a real part of gambling in our community and should not be hidden or ignored.
The buck-passing needs to stop. The Australian community, **all of us**, have a responsibility to work together to try and reduce the percentage of us effected by problem gambling. In the words of a New Zealand responsible gambling campaign: **“Our communities, our families, our problem”**.

Yours faithfully

Megan Height
Gambling Counsellor

Hunter Council on Problem Gambling