

SUBMISSION FOR GAMBLING:

To the Productivity Commission:

I am an experienced full time gambling counsellor (for three and a half years now) and would like to give my feedback/comments on what I think are crucial ideas and recommendations in regards to gambling.

Firstly, I wish to say that daily I hear from people of all ages who have formed a gambling addiction and as such I see the first hand suffering of clients who battle with this addiction. It is estimated that for every one person who gambles 7 to 10 other people are impacted upon, this includes: partners, family members, friends and even work colleagues/bosses. It is often quoted that only 3% of the population have a major problem and this may seem like a small amount but given that so many other people are impacted upon by the consequences of gambling clearly this 3% could easily be 20% if one takes into account those impacted by flow on effects of problem gambling.

Secondly, I would like to say that I feel as a gambling counsellor that we are continually downstream from the effects of gambling and cleaning up the mess at the end of the river so to speak. For every one person who may after much suffering begin to overcome the addiction (and some do not) there are always going to be two or more walking in with another gambling addiction to be resolved. Thus, it is a never ending process of cleaning up the mess that poker machines, TAB & a gambling culture have created (90% of my clients would be due to poker machine addiction). We have to look at ways of stopping gambling addiction at the top of the river, at the beginning rather than cleaning up the mess at the end. Given that this addiction is such a secretive one this may be an almost impossible task unless something is done to prevent the addiction in the first place. In previous times unwise decisions by Premiers and Governments has led to the placing of vast numbers of Poker machines in Hotels and Clubs and this changed the very nature of society and has led to major gambling addictions. Placing ATM machines in these venues also led to the possibility of gamblers losing whole wages and vast amounts of money quickly. The fact that Western Australia has such a low prevalence of problem gamblers is proof that few Poker machines lead to fewer problems. My clients tell me that when they go to countries that have no poker machines in hotels or clubs that their problem ceases and they once again can save money. But, as soon as they come back to Australia the problem restarts. Is this not proof itself that the gambling addiction is caused by the machines themselves and the access to these machines. Suggestion: Remove ATM machines at Hotel and Clubs. Or, have restrictions on amount of money that can be withdrawn, or amount of times an ATM can be accessed in one day etc. Use Western Australia as a role model, the state continues to function well without major gambling income.

Thirdly, I hear the argument that gambling creates large revenue for the Government and Clubs and that the Clubs support the community etc. I would wonder why we continue to support a money making method that creates so much pain and suffering to so many people and society and the community. Many lives are destroyed by legal gambling and this is well know and documented. Clearly the dependence by clubs and Governments on revenue created from the Pokies is a major issue here and one that has not been addressed seriously in the past. To allow a money making scheme that

destroy lives is clearly a major problem in itself and has moral and ethical consequences. In years gone by O H & S practices were brought in to prevent damage done to the individual. Thus, if a machine caused damage something was done to protect the workers from harm, laws introduced etc. Hence, if it is known that poker machines cause harm (addiction, mental health issues, health problems, suicide, depression, family breakdown, stealing to fund the addiction, bankruptcy etc) why is there no protection for the individuals who continue to suffer from these machines? Suggestion: All EGM machines should state real odds and real facts about how the machine works i.e. (87 cent in the dollar) Also, warning signs about the chance of being addicted need to be placed on the machines. For example, if you gamble once a week you have a one in seven chance of being addicted. It should be stated that EGM are not designed to supplement income or create wealth for the individual. Look at other alternatives for clubs to raise money that does not involve gambling. Decrease the need for Governments to rely on gambling as a source of tax.

Fourthly, I hear from my clients that it is such a difficult addiction to overcome as these poker machines are in every pub/hotel, club and casino. Thus, wherever people go to socialise they are faced with the fact that poker machines are in the same location. I am seeing a lot more young males (18 to 25) who are seeking help for gambling addiction and many younger people socialise around clubs and pubs as a way of life. Thus, clearly a certain percentage of these young people will get caught up in this addiction. If this addiction continues by the time these young people are 30 or 35 they will have no savings, no house, have large credit card debts, have low self esteem, often suicidal, often no partners or friends and live a very lonely life based on going to the club, pub or TAB to gamble. Is this acceptable as a society to see this happening? Clearly recent research seems to indicate that the brain is still maturing till age 25 and we need to protect those vulnerable to the EGM mind games. Suggestion: Raise the legal age limit to 21 before a person can gamble. Look at ways of protecting young men from forming this life destroying habit.

Fifthly, for too long the addicted person has been blamed for having a weakness or problem. From the many clients that I have seen I can testify that anyone can become addicted to pokies or other forms of gambling. There is no weak personality or flaw in character. Thus, the responsibility should be put back onto the EGM makers and owners to prove that these machines do not cause addiction but are simply entertainment machines. Clearly, a lot of the blame is placed on the gambler here rather than face the truth which is that EGM machines are designed to take large amounts of money from the player and can lead to full blown dependence on these machines. Where are the warning signs on these machines that state that if you gamble more than once a week you have a one in seven chance of forming a gambling addiction? Why are there no real signs on the EGM machines that give the real odds of winning if a person gambles \$100 for example? The fact is that the machines are designed to pay out only approx 87 cents in the dollar, but where is this information for the player to see? The lack of real information about the EGM machines, how they work and function is clearly a major issue to be considered. The player/consumer has a right to know the facts about gambling and how these EGM machines rely on chance and may cause addiction if played regularly. The consumer is left in the dark when it comes to poker machines and how they really work and what might be the consequences if they continue to gamble etc. Also, EGM manufacturers need to be truthful about the design of the machines and whether they are designing a machine

that causes addiction. Why is there a need for hundreds of millions of dollars to be spent on ways of improving EGM machines that already do harm in the society? It is time for the owners of these machines to take responsibility for the damage that these EGM machines do to average Australians. For too long the blame has been put onto the gambler when it is clearly the EGM that causes the addiction in the first place.

Suggestion: Real facts about gambling placed on each machine about the odds of winning if one gambles say \$50 or \$100. Warnings placed on the machines that state that they cause addiction and what are the chances of being addicted. More consumer rights in knowing the real chances of winning or losing. Designers of the EGM being held accountable for the way the machines are designed to make excessive money and may lead to addiction for so many Australians. Limit or stop all research into designing newer EGM machines that may cause further harm or addiction in our society.

In the past Governments have made unwise decisions that have led to a dependence by both clubs/hotels on income or profits from poker machines. In the mid 1990's placing EGM in hotels has led to a society saturated by poker machines. Further, placing ATM machines in clubs and pubs has made it very difficult for problem gamblers to stop gambling. We are now living with the consequences of such decisions but it is the general Australian people who suffer from the impact of problem gambling. Although problem gambling may not have increased it is still a major issue and has a negative impact on hundreds of thousands of Australians. I see some of the victims of poker machines. I don't just see a statistic but lives torn apart from gambling. The financial and social impact/cost of gambling may well outweigh any taxes raised or profits made by clubs and pubs. The small contribution given back to the community cannot in any way make up for the huge amount of damage done to thousands of Australians. I can't believe that those who suffer from gambling addiction are seen as a statistic and are sacrificed for the sake of taxes, profits and wealthy clubs or hotels. There is clearly a need to highly regulate the use of poker machines and problem gamblers. The fact problem gamblers contribute 40 to 50% of clubs/pubs profits should ring major alarm bells. How would these places survive if not for the problem gamblers who contribute such huge amounts of money? There are now policies on responsible serving of alcohol it is time to update the gaming industry so that it too have policies implemented for the responsible use of gaming machines. Suggestion: Have new policies for clubs/hotels/TAB in regard to the responsible use of gaming machines and gambling in general.

I write on behalf of many gamblers who have fallen victim to gambling, especially poker machines. A trap that has been made worse by greed for profits, government support and EGM design and research. It is time to stop cleaning up the mess at the end of the problem gambling river that keeps on flowing due to large profits, greed and cleverly designed machines that cause addiction and Governments who depend on taxes raised by poker machines. Past decisions have led to this cycle of dependence where poker machines are now the centre of society. We live with past decisions that have cost thousands of people their lives (suicide), jobs, family (divorce & separation) depression and social isolation. We continue to blame the gambler but the real blame should be based on past decisions and the EGM which cause 85 to 90% of all gambling addictions. It is time to stop cleaning up the mess at the end and take real action to stop the problem at the beginning. If we have to tolerate EGM that cause

so much damage then changes need to take place now. I have given some suggestions on what these changes may need to be.

Thanking You,
Rod Isaac
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