

PUBLIC GAMBLING INQUIRY

Name of Organisation:

Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association

Postal Address:

P.O Box 2223
Footscray Victoria 3011

Street Address:

160 Nicholson St
Footscray Victoria 3011

Presenters:

Ms Cam Nguyen
President

Mr Tam Dinh
Problem Gambling Counsellor

Telephone:

(03) 9396 1922

Facsimile:

(03) 9396 1923

Introduction

As a provider of a problem gambling counselling service and a wide range of other social welfare services to the Vietnamese community in the Western region of Melbourne, we would like to assist the Commission by providing information on:

A. A Profile of the Vietnamese Gamblers in the Western Region.

B. Our Experience in Dealing with Problem Gambling.

In providing you with information on these areas, we are drawing from our casework with the Vietnamese gamblers and their families in the Western region and from a focus group we conducted in June, 1998.

A. A Profile of the Vietnamese Gamblers in the Western Region.

Who gamble and why?

Despite the relatively high profile and the frequently exploited image of the Vietnamese gamblers at Crown Casino, there has been a near complete absence of research identifying the demographic make-ups of the Vietnamese patrons frequenting Crown Casino. Apart from Crown Casino's own figures which indicated that of the 12 million people who visited Crown Casino last year, 60 per cent were people with a Mongol-Asian appearance, we have little research information about the age, gender, income level and cultural backgrounds of these patrons. In the absence of research evidence, we believe that some data provided by our clients and focus group participants would shed some useful light.

In 1997, the Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association was successful in tendering for a problem gambling counselling service for Vietnamese gamblers and their families living in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The service commenced its operation in November the same year, and provided assistance to 30 people with gambling related difficulties during this period. Of these 30 people, 18 were females, 12 were males, 21 were gamblers, 9 were family members of gamblers, 14 were not in the labour force (which meant they were either staying home looking after children, studying or unemployed) and their ages ranged from 26 to 63 years. Those coming to us for assistance either had a serious problem with their spouse, financial difficulties or debts, had been ordered by the Magistrates' Court to undergo counselling or were about to appear in court because of their gambling or gambling-related activities. Of the 30 people who sought help from our service in the last year, 15 were involved with the court, 13 had financial difficulties or debts, 11 had underlying relationship difficulties, 8 were involved in stealing chips, cheating at casino games, stealing or shoplifting, 5 were involved with inappropriate money-lending schemes, and 4 had thought about committing suicide at some stage.

Data obtained from a focus group of 10 participants indicate that five of the ten participants satisfy the criteria of the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Version 4) for maladaptive and persistent gambling. Of these participants, two actually reported on the questionnaire that they have thought at some stage that they might have a gambling addiction.

Both data from our casework and focus group indicated that the most favoured form of gambling is casino games. The data also indicated that the frequency of gambling could range from a few times a year to 5 times a week, spending from 20 to 1000 dollars, 1 to 5 hours on each occasion. Some people indicated that on some occasions, they stayed at Crown Casino for a day or 2. Their gambling money comes from their income from CentreLink, saving, money borrowed from friends, relatives, banks, the selling or pawning of their personal valuables. The largest amount lost was 80,000 dollars and the biggest debt reported is 40,000 dollars.

People declared that easing loneliness, boredom or emotional pains, forgetting personal problems and to feel good are the main reasons why they gamble. Obviously, there are other motivating factors as well. For instance, both data from our casework and focus group indicate that the participation in leisure and recreational activities and the range of familiar recreational and entertainment opportunities where our clients and focus group participants can enjoy themselves are very limited. For this reason, it is not difficult to understand that Crown Casino is perceived by some people as a pleasant environment where a wide range of exciting gambling activities are offered. Other powerful mindsets or attitudes are also brought back to life or may influence their inclination toward gambling. For example, coming from a highly populated country and a community-oriented culture, Vietnamese people may find Crown Casino a pleasant and attractive environment because they are surrounded by a lot of people, particularly people from their own background. The risk-taking element of gambling activities is another powerful motivator for Vietnamese gamblers. Coming from a country where an inherent feature of their lifestyle is constantly having to make decisions in the face of much uncertainty, gambling becomes a potentially exciting activity because it appeals to this once highly active mindset. Furthermore, another obvious feature of gambling is the possibility of winning. This possibility of winning may be interpreted as a desire to beat a system. This is a particularly attractive feature of gambling because to be able to survive in our country people need to outwit and beat a larger system: the government. Gambling at the casino may be especially appealing to members of the Vietnamese because it brings to life this powerful mindset as well.

Although the information presented above is drawn from only a very small sample, it illustrates a need to understand the issue in greater depth. Ideally, a research involving patrons at Crown Casino would be most informative. The research could examine not only gambling patterns and characteristics of Vietnamese gamblers but also the level of awareness of the Vietnamese community about problem gambling, problem gambling counselling services, their expectations of and their willingness to seek assistance from such a service.

B. Our Experience in Dealing with Problem Gambling.

Counselling

Some of the emerging trends we have noticed in our case work in the last 12 months include a reluctance of gamblers to seek help as those who have approached our service do so because they have gotten themselves into a crisis or a situation where they cannot contain it any longer or resolve it on their own. For example, they may be required to appear in court, have run out of money and so on. We have also found that our clients are more focused on and more interested in resolving these immediate difficulties than addressing issues of which their gambling addiction may be just a symptom.

The trends we have just mentioned can be explained in several ways. For instance, the reluctance of gamblers to seek help can be attributed to the fact that the service is new, or to the unfamiliarity with the concept of counselling - a lot of people in the Vietnamese community and perhaps other communities as well do not know what counselling involves or how it can help them. Another factor would be the gamblers' inherent tendency to deny their addiction. The reluctance to seek help in the earlier stages of the gambling problem may be due to the shame and embarrassment associated with going to see a counsellor, especially an unfamiliar one. Traditionally, our clients would be more comfortable talking to close friends or older relatives about their personal problems than accessing a counselling service. Besides, our clients come from a background in which much energy is consumed and directed toward making a living and there is little energy or time left to dwell on personal issues especially those that are psychological in nature. As a consequence of this, they are not aware of or sensitive toward their psychological needs. Hence, the only assistance they think they need is assistance of a practical nature.

Venue exclusion

Crown Casino has a Self-Exclusion Order which allows individuals wishing to be banned from the casino to voluntarily apply. The purpose of this order seems to act as a way of minimising problem gambling but we have doubt about the effectiveness of this strategy. In some cases, this strategy not only fails to help the gamblers give up gambling but also exacerbates the gamblers' dire situation. A case in point involves a gambler, who was given an exclusion order by Crown Casino but kept coming back to the casino. He was not only able to get inside the casino but also was left to gamble away all his money and only then was he apprehended by security staff. And this has happened on more than one occasion. Clearly this put the purpose of the exclusion order into question. In this particular case, the exclusion order not only failed to prevent gamblers from further gambling activities but it seemed more like a license to fine problem gamblers.

Advertising & Promotion

We object to the advertising tactics used by many gaming venues which not only deliberately disguise gambling activities under the mask of entertainment but also offer freebies and falsely promote the odds of winning. In particular, Crown Casino has targeted our vulnerable community by having advertisements in Vietnamese newspapers, providing a venue for culturally specific entertainment event and by arranging free bus trips and promising financial incentives to organisations for recruiting people to visit Crown Casino.

In addition to the lack of natural light and an absence of clocks in the casino and gaming venues, there are also other strategies to heighten the illusion of winning and a sense of control. For instance, many games operate on a random basis and yet some gaming tables have visual display of the previous winning numbers and at some gaming tables patrons are given recording sheets and pencils to record the winning numbers to falsely promote a sense of predictability and controllability.

Furthermore, Crown Casino increases people's perception of frequency of winning not only by having big visual displays and advertisements but also by having announcements over a loudspeaker of a poker machine jackpot winner. If every gambler who has lost everything is announced over the loudspeaker in the same way, problem gambling would be greatly reduced. Moreover, the promotion of the illusion of winning is also built into a poker machine in which a

winning pay out is made with a loud noise as coins come crashing into the metal pay out tray to remind nearby players that winning is a real possibility. In addition to these, the casino also encourages gambling by rewarding players with points, sending promotional materials to member patrons, offering free credit coupons, and free meals.

Other Concerns

We would like to raise our concerns about the targeting of gaming machines in areas that have high levels of unemployment and low income earners. For instance, cities with the highest levels of low income earners and unemployed people in Victoria like Maribyrnong, Darebin and Greater Dandenong cities also have the highest number of electronic gaming machines per 1000 adults. Clearly, gaming venues capitalise on the vulnerability of the unemployed and low income earners by exploiting the time they have on their hands and on their naïve attitude of viewing gambling as an investment that may change their life for the better.

Another concern is the lack of culturally appropriate social and recreational activities for the Vietnamese community. For instance, 30 – 50 older women meet every week at our Footscray office to play cards with low stakes: such harm minimisation activity would be organised at other venues if additional resources were available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that the information provided by our clients and focus group participants suggests an urgent need for a greater understanding of gambling patterns and problem gambling within the Vietnamese community. Of particular importance is the need to understand the unwillingness to seek help by Vietnamese problem gamblers and to find strategies to encourage help seeking behavior among problem gamblers. In addition, we would like to raise our concerns about the effectiveness of exclusion orders, and the misleading advertising and promoting tactics which specifically target those members of the community who can least afford to gamble. We suggest that advertising promoting gambling attractions should carry warning: ‘gambling is a wealth hazard’. We urge the government to take action to ensure more accurate information about the odds of winning and the harm gambling brings to the general community. We would also like to urge the government to allocate resource to the promotion and provision of sports, artistic and recreational activities which address the recreational needs of Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds of all ages. Finally, we would like to say that although the contribution by Vietnamese gamblers to the government coffers via the gambling tax is, in all probability, appreciably greater than the percentage of Vietnamese in the Australian population, the benefits and services funded by the gambling tax are usually neither relevant nor appropriate to the Vietnamese community in Victoria. This consideration added to the fact that the community’s level of income is lower than that of the general community makes the redistribution of income through gambling all the more regressive and socially inequitable.