

Submission to the Productivity Commission's Enquiry on Gambling

The following comments are issued in response to the Commission's call for submissions to its enquiry into gambling in Australia.

Centrecare Marriage and Family Service is a Catholic Church sponsored counselling, mediation and family support agency with branches in Perth CBD, Mirrabooka (a suburb 15km north of Perth) and Kalgoorlie (eastern Goldfields 600 km from Perth). Services are also provided in several other minor locations.

Centrecare operates some 30 programs and the attached structure chart gives some idea of the range of work. One of the smaller programs is a BreakEven counselling and community education service for problem gamblers and their families. Centrecare holds a contract with a non statutory committee to provide the service. The Committee is representative of the gaming industry in Western Australia and the state authority covering this area.

We have grouped our comments under the following headings:

- **Structures for funding services**
- **Public Education**
- **Research**
- **Remedial Services**

1 Structures for funding services

The way in which government is involved in the gambling industry is an important variable in how services designed to ameliorate the harmful impact of gambling can be established, promoted and utilised. One could argue that all revenue raised by government from gambling should be spent solely on the regulation of the industry, public education concerning the potentially harmful effects of gambling products, research into ways of minimising harm and for the provision of special support services for those who experience difficulties as a consequence of their gambling behaviour.

Where governments find that a significant portion of their general revenue comes from gambling, there is a tendency to become involved in promoting the product as a means of safeguarding revenue. This is particularly true for state governments which have been struggling to find ways of maintaining their income, given the primacy of the Commonwealth in such matters.

It is true of course that all government taxes on products (both goods and services) entails some form of approval of the goods and services themselves. This applies to excises on alcohol and tobacco, both products which have been criticised for their harmful effects on public health.

However, we would contend that where the nature of the product is significantly suspect in terms of its potentially harmful effects, governments should minimise their dependence upon it as a source of general revenue. It is important that government not be compromised in its primary duty to safeguard community health and cohesion.

We are of the opinion that the public health message about the risks of gambling has been substantially compromised. The advertising of remedial services is restricted due to the conflict of such advertising with the promotion of gambling products.

It is our view that, governments need to limit their dependence on revenue generated through the gambling industry. Additionally, the collection of taxes on the industry should then be disbursed by a statutory agency with legislative safeguards as to its independence and autonomy. Such a statutory body would need to be able to actively promote public education, finance research and adequately fund support programs. The independence of such a body is essential, if it is to effectively deal with potential opposition from those whose profits may be adversely affected by such activities.

2 Public Education

There are a range of options which need consideration under this heading. Research may need to be undertaken to determine what may be the best approach to public education. However, there are a range of options which could be considered for implementation as soon as possible.

Consideration should be given to laws similar to those in the alcohol area where excessive consumption is prescribed. Persons who assist over consumption eg bartenders/bar managers may be held liable for damage done to the individual drinker, and others.

Limits on time spent at poker machines might be considered as an example. Anyone knowingly selling gambling products to a person who has been identified as a problem gambler could commit an offence. Identification of such individuals would not be difficult in those instances where they frequent licensed gambling premises. Such identification would become problematic when gamblers access such forms of gambling as Lotto.

All gambling products could carry warnings about possible excessive use and addiction. Similarly, they could display other information identifying the "return rate" and the skill level required to achieve the specified return. Some products, eg pokies might carry the following:

Skill Level	Zero
Return rate	85%
Addictiveness rate	High

By contrast, some card games might display the following information:

Skill level	High
Return rate	20% - 200% (dependent on skill)
Addictiveness	Moderate

Community awareness programs should be run in schools and the general media. These awareness campaigns could give regular updates on the above ratings for all gambling products.

Strict codes for advertising gambling products would be instituted. Complaints in relation to advertising could be heard by an independent commission. Such a commission would have the power to order advertising retractions and changes to advertising material

3 Research

Research into alcohol, tobacco and other drug usage has been funded by a variety of methods, usually involving governments. The outcome of such research has resulted in better informed communities. Community support for research into the wide range of issues surrounding gambling is also likely to result in a growing awareness as to the positive and negative impacts of gambling.

The research could help formulate answers to such issues as:

- The extent to which problematic gambling is a form of "addiction";
- How the development of gambling addiction can be prevented;
- Effective treatment strategies for people with gambling problems;
- The economic effects of gambling behaviour at both the micro and macro levels;
- The relationship between problematic gambling and other forms of social distress eg family breakdown, criminal behaviour, depression and suicide;
- The effectiveness of preventative education with various age groups;
- The schedules of reinforcement that are built into games;
- The impact of problem gambling on individuals, families and the community.

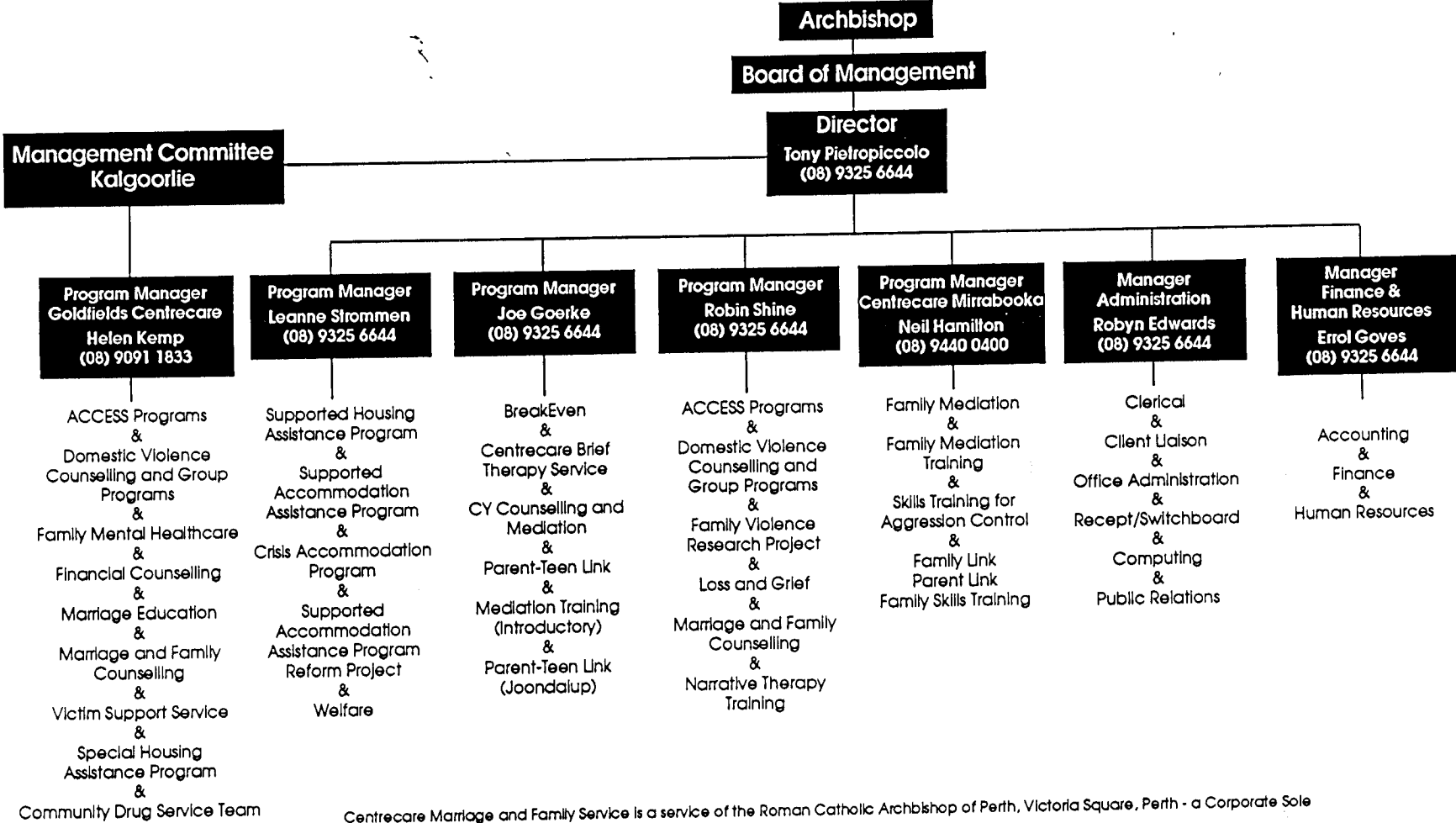
Research would need to be wide ranging and longitudinal. Approaching the gambling issue from the perspectives of biology, psychology, sociology and economics could prove very useful. Such an integrated and multifaceted study would lead to an holistic view of this social phenomena. The funding of such an expensive exercise could be drawn from the very large revenue that both governments and private operators make from gambling.

4 Remedial services

Remedial services should be adequately supported and advertised in ways which ensure that the general community is aware of their existence and relevance. It is essential that not only gamblers but their families, employers, colleagues and other persons are aware of the services available to problem gamblers. This awareness would allow family members and acquaintances to support the problem gambler's tentative moves towards rehabilitation.

A range of intervention models could be developed through specialist counselling and support services. However, Centrecare believes that it is equally important to educate all involved in the delivery of community services in the issues surrounding gambling. Where appropriate such education should include training in treatment strategies. This will enhance the sensitivity of workers to the presence of gambling. It will also lead to an expansion in the provision of effective help to problem gamblers and their families.

Organisational Chart for
Centrecare Marriage and Family Service
 as at July 1998



Centrecare Marriage and Family Service is a service of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Perth, Victoria Square, Perth - a Corporate Sole