



1 INTRODUCTION

We welcome this Inquiry and are delighted to have the opportunity to make a submission on behalf of the ethnic Chinese communities of Victoria.

The Action Group developed out of concern expressed by the representatives of a number of Chinese churches and key Chinese organisations present at a meeting convened in Melbourne on 16th September 1996 by Captain Sam Pho, Chairperson of the Chinese in the Churches Committee at the time (and Commanding Officer of The Chinese Corps of The Salvation Army). Please see the attached flier for an introduction to the Action Group, its aims etc.

To date the Group has no incorporated status or resources other than the voluntary energy and enthusiasm of its active members. We have chosen not to establish the Group as a formal entity for the following reasons:

- We are a single interest group
- Many of our members belong to various organisations (or represent various organisations) with whom we could be seen to be competing for resources and/or status if we set up a formal structure
- Many community leaders, individuals and organisations have signified their support for our aims and work
- Several organisations (such as the BreakEven services of Victoria) feel able to work with us on matters of common interest such as community education.
- We have been able to collaborate effectively with organisations which have complementary aims, such as with the Chinese counsellors of BreakEven, in the development and promotion of the Chinese Telephone Counselling Network.

The Group of active members meets approximately 7 times a year and a number of working groups or sub committees are more active and meet to plan or work as required. It is our intention to hold at least one Open Meeting a year at which time we clarify the issues and concerns currently perceived by the community in respect to gambling, provide information, account for our activities and seek a mandate for the continuation or redirection of our work from the wider ethnic Chinese community. (Please see the attached minutes of the recent Open Meeting 11/11/98).

There is an open invitation to any member of our community to join the Group and to give such time or resources as the individual or organisation feels able to offer.

Minutes of all meetings are available to those interested and the Group will now look at developing a wider range of strategies to raise the awareness of the community of problem gambling as requested on 11th November. To do so raises all sorts of resource issues but we look forward to maximising whatever resources are available in the community and from collaborating organisations to achieve agreed goals.

2 PROBLEM GAMBLING AND THE ETHNIC CHINESE COMMUNITIES

Until quite recently, there was a perception that the ethnic communities were not experiencing significant impacts from problem gambling. There were few indicators of need for help services other than for financial assistance and family support services -even then the reason for the increase in demand for these services was usually unexplained or unclear.

The Chinese Community is quite clear that problem gambling is a serious problem among the ethnic Chinese and both the staff of organisations and the clergy of all denominations have either heard anecdotal evidence about, or know of, people who have experienced family breakdown, the loss of assets including business and home, have accepted loans with impossible repayment conditions, become involved in crime and /or who have had to cope with the suicide of some one close to them. Yet the number of Chinese people seeking assistance from BreakEven is still very low. (N.B. the BreakEven problem gambling services in Victoria are the government funded service system charged with developing effective services for problem gamblers and those adversely affected by their activities.)

To date most Chinese do not understand the western concept of counselling - of talking to a stranger in an office environment about one's inner most feelings and anxieties. To most Chinese (and particularly to those who were not educated in this country) there is a loss of face for both individual and family in admitting to something shameful outside the family. Once a problem becomes too big to keep hidden or to solve on one's own, the extended family is seen as the only source of help. Unfortunately the help given may not be effective as the family do not understand how best to help the individual and how best to protect their interests.

Unfortunately new settlers and international students may have very limited family to whom they can turn. Unfortunately there is a very limited understanding of the mainstream service system and ways in which it can provide help to people with problems arising from problem gambling. Unfortunately many members of the community are suspicious about organisations that are funded by government and the degree to which private and personal information is kept strictly confidential. Unfortunately there is little understanding of the most effective ways of helping a problem gambler to take responsibility for, and deal with, his/her problems or how to safeguard the rights of third parties. Unfortunately many Chinese people have a very limited understanding of Australian financial products and our legal system and so make limited use of the appropriate products and services available to people living in Victoria.

The constraints listed above all conspire to limit the number of Chinese who acknowledge that they have a gambling problem (including their family and friends) and

who present for help to the network of services currently funded by government to help them.

3 NEED TO DESTIGMATISE GAMBLING PROBLEMS

Chinese people will continue to try to keep their problems secret whilst they fear that they will lose face from acknowledging their problems. Since our governments have sanctioned and legalised most forms of gambling, what can be done to destigmatise having problems from gambling?

The current position of both the Government of Victoria and the Gaming Industry is that only around 1% of the population develops problems from their gambling. If someone develops problems they are left believing that there is something wrong with them - they are weak, should be ashamed of themselves for being unable to control themselves; problem gamblers rarely question whether there could be something wrong with the gambling product or the way in which it is promoted!

Allcock (1997) noted that, although many endeavours have been made to determine what distinguishes problem gamblers from other gamblers, none has convincingly or consistently achieved this. There are even difficulties in distinguishing gamblers from non-gamblers. McMillen (1996) noted Kallick-Kaufman's contention that the only factors, which most differentiated gamblers from non-gamblers, were the degree of an individual's exposure to gambling and the availability of that activity. (Ref. VCGA report on the Definition and Incidence of Problem Gambling; Chapter 1)

How can strong messages be given to members of ethnic communities that, to have problems from gambling that has got out of control is not shameful; to refuse to recognise, and to seek help with, one's gambling problems is shameful?

4 AGGRESSIVE MARKETING OF GAMING IN VICTORIA

Gambling is gambling. Commercial gaming is not a respected activity among Chinese families. Gaming is something you do with friends in the privacy of the home or for fun at festival time. Even then the size of the bet is kept small. The Action Group believes the impact of the aggressive marketing of legal gaming as "entertainment" and of gaming venues as safe places for women has been considerable.

The Action Group is most concerned that the following elements of the gambling environment in Victoria, taken together, are very destructive of the natural checks and balances developed and practiced by the Chinese to assist the community to protect themselves from problem gambling:

- the availability of gaming venues and gambling of many types close to where most people live or work

- the strong message from the Victorian government that it is not only OK to gamble, but it is good to gamble
- the promotion of gambling by status figures from the worlds of politics, business and popular entertainment
- the overemphasis in the Industry's advertising of winning and easy money which at times seem positively unethical
- The targeting of the Asian communities (including international students and new settlers) by the Casino.

The opportunity to get rich quick is very seductive - particularly to those who have very limited contacts in Melbourne, no clear identity or status in Australia, limited finance and assets in this country and a limited knowledge of Australian business or the English language. For these reasons the Chinese community is increasingly seeing problem gambling as a community problem and is asking how it can minimise the harm of the Australian gambling culture to the ethnic Chinese communities?

5 COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND HARM MINIMISATION

The Action Group is acutely aware of the importance of raising the Chinese community's awareness of problem gambling and the availability of help services for those adversely affected. There is an urgent need for the Chinese Community to develop culturally relevant material and harm minimisation programmes, targeting every level of the community. These strategies must be developed by the community, disseminated and managed by members of the community and be evaluated against goals determined with the community. Multicultural campaigns are only successful in a limited way as they fail to target the particular cultural issues of any one ethnic group.

The Action Group has the mandate but not the resources. It has begun to demonstrate what can be done in partnership with Breakeven community education officers and counsellors but much greater resources are required if an effective community education campaign is to be organised.

The Action Group believes that substantial resources (including expertise) should be made available to ethnic communities to undertake appropriate community education and to develop and administer harm minimisation programmes. These strategies could usefully include pre counselling information.

6 DEVELOPMENT OF APPROPRIATE SERVICE RESPONSES

The Action Group is not convinced that therapeutic counselling, the organisation of self help groups and financial counselling provide an adequate range of service responses to the needs of Chinese people with gambling problems. Much more work is needed whereby the current service providers consult with representatives of the Chinese community, including those who have experienced problems from "out of Control"

gambling, and explore how they perceive their experience. Service providers (and government departments charged with the disbursement of funds to alleviate problem gambling) need to be much more "open" to new suggestions as to effective ways to both inform and help those adversely affected by gambling activities.

The Action Group further suggests that many members of ethnic communities - not just the Chinese - will refuse to visit a service which clearly identifies itself as a problem gambling service whilst problem gambling carries the stigma it currently has. We contend that men and women would find it easier to visit a "neutral" programme or agency where the worker can be consulted about a range of matters (e.g. family, relationship and financial problems) and not be designated as only able to work with those with gambling problems.

7 URGENT NEED FOR INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

The Action Group calls for funds to be made available for independent research into the impact of problem gambling on ethnic communities and asks that the ethnic Chinese communities - one of the oldest and largest of the ethnic groups in Australia be one of the first projects to be funded.

Community leaders know there is a problem but do not know how big the problem is, or which sections of the Chinese community are most affected or vulnerable and why. They need hard data from which they and the Chinese infrastructure of community groups and organisations can work with government and the Gambling Industry to plan an effective response to minimise the harm to Chinese people of all ages.

Melbourne
December 1998