

Introduction

This submission has been formulated following the release of the draft report of the Productivity Commission on 19 July 1999.

I congratulate the commissioners and everybody involved in the substantial research work on the presentation and the independent findings that reflect this growing problem in our community.

As a person that was directly affected by problem gambling behaviour (I was addicted to Poker Machine gambling for almost 4 years) and now as a gambling-counsellor (I have counselled more than 200 people over the last 2 years) I would like to address the following issues:

- 1. Education**
- 2. Health**

Education

The Commission has noted deficiencies in

- ❖ Consumer information about the cost and chances of winning for various gambling products especially gambling machines;
- ❖ Information about the risks of problem gambling
- ❖ Controls on misleading advertising
- ❖ Availability of ATM's and credit; and
- ❖ Self-exclusion arrangements.

I agree that all of these areas need to be addressed by the governments. I endorse the various proposals forwarded by the Commission.

But given that gambling has become so pervasive so suddenly, I believe that a wider and ongoing education campaign should be undertaken. (Like “slip, slap, slop” against overexposure to sun). My concern is that future generations, who are already over-exposed to electronic stimuli (TV, Nintendo, and Computer), will find gambling, especially poker machine gambling, the natural progression in their attempts to distract their senses.

Educational Material

There is virtually no educational material available today that explains to young people the traps that are deliberately setup by the gaming operators. I have developed some educational material (both video and audio tapes), for young people and the general public, which deals with the basic issues and questions on gambling, including the risk and the meaning of the publicised odds of winning (perhaps using information such as your table on page XLVII.). I see these products being used both stand-alone and as part of short presentations to many different groups. Schools, colleges, churches, community clubs and other interested organisations could use them for education purposes.

Current Advertising

The Campaign: “If it’s no longer fun – walk away” has no effect on the people that it was supposedly designed for. Many of my clients have actually found that watching this advertisement “made them want **to go gambling**” (names and addresses can be supplied). I would suggest working on a campaign that is more realistic (e.g. TAC ads) and getting input from people that know “what would have to be presented to them so that they would react positively” in regards to their gambling behaviour.

Is Education Worthwhile?

Of the 330,000 people in Australia that experience gambling as a significant problem in their lives, 140,000 of them are experiencing severe problems. However I believe that we should also focus on the 190,000 that have “not fallen completely over the edge” as yet. This can be done in many forms – advertising to counter the “gee isn’t this fun” adverts from the gaming promoters, educational videos and tapes (both for children and adults),

In his Keynote Paper presented to the “gambling away our community” conference, Melbourne 1998, Emeritus Professor David Hawks, National Centre for Research into

prevention of drug abuse, Perth, states the following: “There is I think, one more parallel with alcohol which can be drawn, which I suspect however will be less popular with this audience, many of whose members are understandably involved in the treatment of problem gamblers. It is the assertion that while of course the provision of treatment is a moral requirement of any civilised society, to attempt to provide treatment, which in this case is both costly and difficult, in the absence of any attempt to prevent the occurrence of dependence, is Ononsense. It represents a strategically inappropriate response. And yet it is the response that the gaming industry and government are only too happy to encourage. It is nonsense because the prevalence of dependence on, or problems associated with, these activities is such that treatment, however lavishly provided will **never** be a sufficient response to these problems.”

In other words, Professor Hawks is saying that prevention is better than cure.

The Way Forward

In the field of education there are many possibilities. I am currently recording an audio-tape (guide to positive, controlled gaming) which focuses on strategies designed to help people to make decisions about gambling and to “stick to them” (see also the second edition of my book “Free Yourself Program”). Even people that don’t consider themselves “hooked”, that just spend a little bit too much time and/or money gambling, would probably pick up a tape that teaches them how to “always” control their behaviour in regards to gambling. Audio-tapes are non-intrusive, can be listened to in the privacy of the home, car etc and are “non-judgemental”. They can also function as a safety net for people who have just fallen in “a little bit”. We have prepared plans for an educational video that could be used in schools once funding has been obtained.

Summary

In summary I recommend a concentrated “harm-prevention” approach (perhaps better called “entertaining education”) over the highly promoted “harm-minimisation” approach. This would provide a reduction in already affected “problem gamblers” and better education would definitely help prevent many of our future generations from falling into the “gambling trap”. Long term, prevention will decrease the number of problem gamblers in this wonderful country of ours.

Health

Gambling Addiction – Nutritional Therapy

In my submission (25/11/98 Page 598) I stated that “gambling addiction is also a drug addiction”. In other words, most gamblers get hooked on the “chemical high” that they experience while gambling. Like a drug addict, the chemical imbalance of high arousal chemicals and low well-being chemicals in the brain (caused by constant stimulation) become normal for that person. They then have to increase the bet, up the stakes or take money from sources that are not their own to continue to find an ever-increasing “high”. I had a client telling me once “the biggest high I get now is from **being on the job** to get the money to gamble”. In other words, the thrill of finding new ways to get money to gamble had taken over from the act of gambling itself.

I was disappointed that there was nothing in the report that looked at the link between “chemical imbalance” in the brain and gambling addiction. I would strongly recommend research to be conducted in this area because findings would also lead to a change in therapy. As with alcohol addiction, “nutritional therapy” plays a significant role in the recovery process. There are many studies done in America, which support this theory. My own personal experience and my work with clients proves that, if you feel well, you are able to work with your brain better and can better resist the urge to go gambling.

Consumer’s Health Protection - Ergonomics

The screen of a gambling machine is essentially like the video of a PC. Where office workers are required to use PC’s, there are defined standards for their use. AS3590.2-1990 sets out standards for placement of VDUs to take account of reach areas and limits of vision. It also describes required seating. These standards were developed to ensure that a worker’s eyes, hands and back do not suffer over long periods of time using a PC.

Frequent gamblers are in the same position as office workers, often spending long hours huddles in front of the same screen. Yet their seating and reach and vision requirements are not taken into consideration in the way that they are for office workers.

Another aspect that I have not been able to find any regulation or standard about is the impact of continuous viewing of the gambling machine screen. There are health recommendations for office workers to take a break for 10 minutes every hour they spend on a PC. If this is a requirement for PC’s, it should also be a requirement for gaming machines. The software can easily be adjusted to stop working for the required break. This would have an added advantage of forcing the gambler to remove his or her attention from the machine for a few minutes and could work as a pattern interrupt for problem gamblers.

I propose that a study be urgently commissioned into this health aspect of gambling. By improving ergonomic standards for gaming machines and enforcing “rest periods” in the use of gaming machines will help to break the addiction pattern as well as reducing the health risk to compulsive players.

Air

I haven’t had the time or resources to investigate this, but in most venues smoking is allowed in all areas. The quality of the air in gaming rooms can’t be healthy. Are there standards that must be adhered to for air quality in a public venue and who is the “controlling body” for it? Seeing that “smoking kills” it should be compulsory for venue operators to be for “non-smokers”. This also would disrupt compulsive gaming behaviour for smokers (who would have to go outside for a cigarette), giving the person a chance to “come to their senses”.

Free Tea and Coffee

The provision of the stimulants “tea and coffee” is the choice of the venue operator. As pointed out before, these stimulants contribute to the already imbalanced brain-

chemistry and make it harder for the gambler to achieve a relaxed consciousness. The only beverage that should be offered “free of charge” is water. This would flush out toxins and support a healthier state of mind for the gambler, assisting them to make better decisions about gambling.

Summary

Gaming can be addictive and as such can become a health-hazard. Time on machines should be limited (eg. by having the machine “close down” after a period of time to force gamblers onto other machines), venues should be non-smoking to reduce the impact of even passive smoking and no stimulants should be offered to gamblers in the gaming venues.

Gambling therefore should not be promoted as a “harmless” form of entertainment.

Poker machine gaming should be “purchased” like cigarettes with “warning labels” stating the risk factors. There could be a “fee” to buy a set amount of time in a gaming venue and when the time is up the “purchaser” should have to leave that particular gaming venue or the machine could “close down” for 10 minutes or so. This “pattern interrupt” will help addicted gamblers to regain some control of their habit and is the exact opposite of what Aristocrat (manufacturer of gaming machines) is trying to achieve. They have been quoted in the newspaper as “looking for ways to keep the gambler at the machine longer”! And why would they want to do that – to get more money of course!

If we do not educate our children about the traps set up by the gaming industry and we do not limit access to gaming machines we will be doing the next generation, our children, a grave injustice.