

15/12/2010.

The Honourable Jenny Macklin,
Minister for Families, Housing, community Services and Indigenous Affairs,
Federal Parliament,
Canberra, ACT.

Dear Minister,

I write to express my concerns about the current enthusiasm for pre-commitment as a means of assisting people with gambling problems related to poker machines.

I believe this may not be as successful or as cost effective as many would wish and I have another suggestion to offer based on my experience with this group of gamblers.

My background is that I am a psychiatrist who for thirty years has worked with problem gamblers (using the word "problem" in a general sense). I was the founder of the NSW Council on Problem Gambling and remained with that body throughout its twenty year history before it was wound up and the baton was passed onto the Gambling Impact Society with Kate Roberts. I was also the President of NAGS in 2005 and 2006 – the organisation whose conference you recently addressed. As I am a member of two racing clubs in Sydney I am clearly not anti-gambling however!

For the last year I have asked nearly all the gamblers coming to see me who have a problem with poker machines what they think of pre-commitment. I have not yet had one who knows what it means so I have had to explain the principles and the ask what they think they would do if such a scheme came in.

From their response clearly a voluntary scheme would not work. Bare in mind that these are people who are actively in gambling mode, chasing losses and under all the pressures that gambling problems produce.

So such an approach would have to be involuntary and apply to all gamblers who wish to play the machines in order to "capture" the troubled group. Then it would have to be structured so that they could not play anywhere else in the 24 hour period as most are adamant that they would move onto other destinations if their commitment in one setting was used up. So we are getting into central monitoring with ID production and/or more complex cards needed.

Other concerns also crop up. Some say they would pre-commit at high levels in order to ensure they have enough room to go and chase losses. Naturally they would most likely end up playing to that limit which may even be higher than they would have otherwise gone. The issue of gamblers purchasing cards from other gamblers in the arena is also one we in the field are aware of.

I do think that pre-commitment would help but feel from these experiences the benefits are likely to be much less and the cost very high to change machines.

There is another possibility that would be cheaper and I think more effective. When I was in England last year I noticed that machines had lower limits and these were clearly advertised on each machine that I saw. The limits were 500 pound and 1,000 pounds. All machines also had helpline numbers on the front. While figures vary the last review I saw had bingo causing more problems than machines in that country and perhaps the lower limit has a role to play!

Certainly my customers would think so as I have also asked them if they would play he machines if the maximum they could win is \$1,000 and the almost unanimous answer is "No". Even

those who maintain they are playing the machines just to “zone out” indicate they would think twice before playing so the idea of winning large amounts has a role to play in starting, maintaining and chasing parts of gambling activity but more so I think for those with problems. Lowering the limits I believe may be more effective than pre-commitment.

May I respectfully suggest that your Ministerial Expert Advisory Group, if at all possible under the terms of their task, be asked to consider these points and this option,

Yours Faithfully,

Dr. Clive Allcock, B.Sc., M.B.Ch.B., FRANZCP, LTCL

cc Mr. Andrew Wilkie.

Senator Nick Xenophon.