

Answer to Question taken on Notice by the Australian Psychological Society Canberra Hearing, 14 May 2012

Question:

Senator XENOPHON: But the other issue that I do want to take up is that, when Betsafe gave evidence to this enquiry in Sydney recently, they argued that a tap on the shoulder or a quiet word by a staff member or approaching them in any way at a venue to say: 'Do you want a hand? Do you need some help?' could actually be counterproductive. Do any of you have any comment on that? Should there be some appropriate triggers, such as signs of distress or playing for a long period of time, or by someone saying, 'I'm going to be in trouble when I get home'? What do you say to that comment by Betsafe that a tap on the shoulder might be counterproductive?

Response:

My understanding is that Betsafe argues that staff giving a 'tap on the shoulder' to someone displaying the signs of problem gambling in a venue does not elicit the desired response, and that people who are 'forced' into treatment do not progress therapeutically. Rather, they argue that it is important problem gamblers receive an "immediate, firm" response when they self-disclose.

In general, we would support this view. People who are not ready to admit they have a problem (ie, 'tap on the shoulder') are unlikely to be responsive to suggestions regarding intervention and are more likely to react in a defensive or angry manner. There is a body of literature that shows that counselling or providing treatment to willing clients is generally more effective. This is because many interventions depend on the person being ready and able to be actively engaged in treatment. When someone has admitted they have a gambling problem, then easily accessible, appropriate and effective interventions should be immediately available to take advantage of this window of opportunity when the person is highly motivated for change.

However, the Betsafe view does not take into account the range of other options that should be available and it is important to understand that there is a wide range of potential interventions for problem behaviours, spanning prevention through treatment through 'relapse prevention', and that for complex human behaviours, interventions across this whole spectrum need to be put in place. The Betsafe strategy of providing support for those who self-disclose alongside with self-exclusion, involuntary exclusion, third party exclusion and tertiary counselling treatment is insufficient to address this complex issue in any meaningful way, and only deals with the 'tip of the iceberg'.

Regarding problem gambling, it is first essential that people are protected from developing the problem in the first place by improvements in the safety of the gambling products and venues from a consumer protection perspective. For people who have developed a problem with gambling, interventions need to be matched to their motivational stage. As I noted in the APS evidence, motivational enhancement type approaches are efficacious, which means

matching messages and interventions to people's stage of change. People who do not think they have a problem need messages that help them to become aware that they have a problem, people who have decided they have a problem and are contemplating action need to have information about the courses of action open to them and help to tip their decisional balance toward taking action, those who are ready to take action need easy access to acceptable and effective sources of help, and those who have taken action need support for relapse prevention.

Importantly, there are approaches that work with people to improve their motivation for treatment, and these can be effective for people who are not ready for or ambivalent about treatment. However, confronting people via a 'tap on the shoulder', particularly when they are in a venue in the midst of their problem behaviour is unlikely to be an effective approach. Rather a range of preventive and screening interventions need to be developed within and outside venues to support people to address their problem gambling. As noted in the APS evidence, it is also essential to support significant others in problem gamblers lives (ie, partner/family) as these people are essential motivators and supports and can be an essential element in helping people seek help.