

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Prevention and Treatment of Problem Gambling

I apologise for the lateness of this submission but until recently I was unaware of the Inquiry, which did not seem to be widely publicised.

The submission is based on a brief description of my experience with my partner's gambling addiction and the lessons that can be drawn from this for prevention and treatment of problem gambling.

She is a person of high intelligence and holds a responsible position. Nevertheless, in July 2011 she began gambling heavily on poker machines. I was not aware that this was occurring as we live 200 kilometres apart during the week due to our different employment.

I discovered the problem in November 2011 because our bank queried me on the large number of cash withdrawals. My partner agreed to stop gambling and I believed her. I changed our account to a different bank so that the gambling losses would not be on our record. But in March this year after advice from our bank that our joint account was overdrawn I found that she had continued to gamble frequently.

A feature of gambling addiction is that the gambler often blocks out the amounts they have lost and the consequences. My partner was clearly unaware of how much she had lost until I asked her to go through the bank accounts and add it up. Nor did she seem to recognise the damage that would be done to our relationship and our lives. Gambling addiction appears to bypass the rational part of the brain. Because of this denial you may not get many submissions from problem gamblers.

In total my partner lost well over \$20 000 dollars over 9 months, which for us is a large amount, put us into a very difficult financial position, greatly damaged our reputation with our bank and our plans for the future. My partner had also left some large bills unpaid, and secretly transferred money between accounts, making our bank balance look much better than it was. I am now the sole signatory on the account.

I could not understand how the club concerned did not identify my partner as a problem gambler and act accordingly, as she shows all the classic signs of this. She spent almost every week night gambling in the club from about 11 pm to 2-4 am, repeatedly took cash from the ATM, gambled the maximum per spin, talks or swears at the machine, sits at one machine for hours or moves rapidly from one to another.

I spoke to the club's manager who is also their gambling contact officer. He was very defensive and showed no sympathy for problem gambling. I complained to the ACT Gambling and Racing Commission (GRC), which instigated an inquiry into the matter. But their investigation found that the club had not breached the legislative requirements of the ACT Code of Practice (the Code).

I spoke to the Manager of Compliance and Investigations at the GRC about this. He was willing to discuss the issue at length, but recycled some of the excuses given to me by the Club's manager, eg that it is not unusual because of shift work for gamblers to come in late at night, and that therefore my partner would not have stood out. I have sometimes been in that club after one pm, and each time there were no more than five or six people gambling. Someone gambling nearly every week night until 2-4 am for nine months should stand out, to say the least.

But it appeared from the discussion that the main reason for the GRC not being able to find against the club is the inadequacy of the Code itself. It has at least two major problems. It requires gambling venues to comply with a range of matters, such as gambling services staff having to undertake an approved training program in the responsible service of gambling. But it nowhere requires staff to be proactive in identifying and taking action on individuals who appear to be problem gamblers. So my partner was able to attend the club up to four nights a week most weeks for nine months late at night, showing all the signs of a problem gambler, without ever being the subject of a report. The situation is analogous to training police officers but not requiring them to actively look for and respond to crime.

I have often watched staff on the gambling floor and they rarely look at, let alone watch, individual gamblers. They push the chairs in and pick up empty glasses. Often for long periods there is no staff member on the gambling floor at all. Staff are unable to watch for repeated withdrawals from the ATM because it is located behind a partition a few metres from the nearest poker machine.

A second problem with the Code is that it does not identify most of the classic signs of problem gambling that I have noted above. It is difficult for the GRC to sanction a club for not having observed someone showing these signs if they are not listed in the legislation.

Conclusions

Gambling addicts who are normally honest and reliable will lie and deceive even their closest family in order to continue gambling. Because families are often unaware and therefore unable to intervene, this places a greater onus on governments and gambling venues to act to identify and prevent problem gambling.

Legislation in the ACT and elsewhere needs to be rewritten so that gambling venues are required to seek out and act on problem gambling.

The legislation should include a complete list of all the signs of problem gambling.

Gambling venue staff must be trained not just to recognise problem gambling, but to be proactive in looking for it and acting to prevent it.

Staff are often reluctant to approach potential problem gamblers in case of a hostile reaction. Training should include how to deal with such difficulties as part of the job.

Because casual staff are often used in these venues who may not be aware of frequency of attendance of individual gamblers, there should be a legislative requirement that one or more persons, depending on the size of the venue, should be on the gambling floor at all times with the sole function of identifying and acting on problem gambling. I regard this as a key recommendation.

Even if these measures are taken, they are not sufficient to deal with gambling addiction. Compulsory pre-commitment will have little effect because problem gamblers will mostly write down a large sum.

ATM's should be excluded altogether from venues or a one-off withdrawal only of \$250 allowed.

The maximum bet allowed should be one dollar. Gambling addicts habitually play the maximum hoping for a big hit.

Under no circumstances should gamblers be allowed to play more than one poker machine at a time.

Poker machines should only be activated by a member inserting their membership card. The gambling venue should be required to make an individual's cumulative gambling financial record available to them at any time. The club should actively monitor these records and draw the attention of individuals to their losses in cases where these are large, either cumulatively or on any given night. What is to be regarded as 'large' would need to be defined in legislation, eg over \$500 in one night and \$2000 in one month. Club computers could easily be programmed to automatically draw staff's attention to this, and the gambler in question could be handed a printout.

The services provided by Mission Australia to problem gamblers and their partners we have found to be very valuable and I would recommend that their services be strongly supported and extended to the larger country towns.

31. 5. 2012