

Inquiry into the prevention and treatment of problem gambling

I am an intelligent and highly qualified person who works fulltime in a well paid professional position as well as running a commercial farm with my partner. I am not financially 'well-off' having relatively high expenses. I do not drink alcohol, smoke tobacco or use illicit drugs but several months ago I finally accepted that I had a problem with gambling and in particular was addicted to poker machines. My gambling has jeopardised my relationship with my partner, has put us into a severely compromised financial position and has had a major impact on my and my partner's health and overall well-being. I sought help and have now stopped gambling. I will restrict my comments to problem gambling associated with poker machines drawing heavily on my own experiences. These are, in general, very similar to those expressed by other problem gamblers who I have met since seeking help.

(a) Measures to prevent problem gambling

The only information I had any exposure to on problem gambling were very small notices posted on poker machines or on the back of toilet doors in clubs. These in essence stated if gambling was affecting your life then you could get help by contacting a certain phone number. This messaging was totally ineffectual – such notices are either ignored by problem gamblers or do not convey the messages needed to prevent problem gambling. I thought of myself as a 'recreational' gambler who enjoyed visiting casinos and poker machine venues with my partner for entertainment. We went together and gambled on an occasional basis (e.g. once every couple of months). Over a period of time my behaviour changed to gambling with larger bets, more and more money and lying about how much money I was gambling and how much I was losing. I became increasingly frustrated and angry when I lost and I no longer found gambling to be the 'fun entertainment' I previously enjoyed. I was on the pathway to becoming a gambling addict. I did not think rationally about gambling and thus did not moderate my behaviour in any rational way. I focussed on the few 'big' wins I had previously and started to 'chase losses' thinking the next big win was just around the corner. I started to go gambling by myself. I kept my gambling secret from my partner and increasingly lied about our finances and my activities.

What I needed was information on the **signs** of risky or problem gambling and clear messages that challenged me to think about **what changes had occurred over time in not only my gambling behaviour but general behaviour**, and how serious these were. Campaigns aimed at preventing problem gambling must aim at early intervention so people like me do not have to be in crisis before their problem is recognised and acted on.

Problem gambling is associated with three influences:

1. **Increasing dependency** – I became dependent on playing the pokies as a way of 'escaping'. I used gambling as a 'coping' mechanism. While this might work in the short-term it is not a long term solution and ultimately exacerbates other stresses and problems. People need to be made aware that **if they are using gambling as a way to escape the pressures of day-to-day life then they may be at risk of being or becoming a problem gambler and they need to think about other solutions.**
2. **Boosting finances** – Gambling is one of the few ways that you have a chance of making money quickly. The promotion of 'jackpots' are an open invitation to gamble, adding to the lure of potentially large payouts from machines. Most gamblers know that the odds of

winning are very low but there is always that chance that you might come away with a 'big' win. Players are encouraged to bet big as many poker machines state that your chance of winning on that machine is higher the higher the bet. People need to be made aware that **if they see gambling as a 'quick fix to money problems' then they may be at risk of being or becoming a problem gambler and they need to think about other solutions.**

3. **Gambling as an addiction** – Poker machines are deliberately designed to accord with brain functioning. Playing poker machines intensively over months and years will create chemical imbalances and imbalances between the hindbrain (primitive brain) and the neocortex (rational brain) resulting in addiction in some people. I was particularly susceptible (I have adult ADHD and have struggled with atypical cognitive behaviours). People need to be made aware **that gambling can lead to addiction.** Habituation also means that you need greater and greater stimulus to get the same chemical "rush" all of which leads to problem gambling.

Anti-problem gambling campaigns need to be seen as a population health campaign, incorporated into Government health and welfare budgets and be run along the lines of quit smoking and fighting obesity health prevention programs. They need to take a "whole of adult population" approach in order to access all problem gamblers and they have to focus on early intervention. Such campaigns must take place in the broader community to reach problem gamblers when they might be more receptive to the messages being conveyed - this is not in gambling venues when problem gamblers are gambling!

(b) measures which can encourage risky gambling behaviour

I was exposed to a number of measures operated by clubs to encourage risky gambling on poker machines. These included: offers of large jackpots - an inducement to gamble more money either at higher bets or over longer timeframes; the physical layout of poker machine venues provided easy access to ATMs; amenities provided such as free tea and coffee or food; prize draws for members which are typically held in the poker machine area. Advertising of gambling, especially on television, should be banned similar to the sale of alcohol and tobacco products.

The two issues that most affected my gambling was the very easy access to ATMs and having high betting limits on the machines. These are a recipe for disaster! Most clubs are located in commercial precincts where other ATMs are available – there is no need to have ATMs in clubs. While I am not convinced mandatory pre-commitments would work, limiting bet sizes and maximum payouts would go some-way to limiting the ability to bet large amounts, the attraction of having a large win and therefore the potential to lose large amounts. I also gambled very quickly – it would be a simple measure to slow the timing of poker machines down, again reducing some of their attraction and ability to bet and feed money in very quickly.

(c) early intervention strategies and training of staff

Research apparently has shown that most club staff have a very good success rate in spotting problem gamblers but do nothing about this. Clubs have a duty of care. Most of my gambling occurred at one club and I exhibited well known signs of problem gambling that should have led to intervention by staff but did not. These included:

- I gambled on my own
- I did not interact or talk with other gamblers
- I attended one club on a very frequent basis – 3-4 consecutive nights every week

- I visited this club at an odd time – from midnight to early in the morning, often up to 4.00am when the club closed. As I arrived late, the doors to the club were locked and a staff member was required to let me in
- I usually had large bets, often playing the maximum bet
- I carried on playing even after large wins
- I was secretive about finances
- I made numerous ATM withdrawals on the same night
- I had superstitions - only played certain machines, either sitting on one machine for a very long time or moving quickly between my favourites.
- I talked to the machines or touched/stroked them
- I always sat in the same position
- I gambled for relatively long periods of time without taking any breaks
- I played very fast, putting money in and pushing buttons quickly
- I would get angry and frustrated. I would groan, curse and sometimes hit a machine if I was losing
- I would feel depressed or get edgy or anxious or worried if I was losing but could be euphoric when I won

For staff in gaming venues, the signs of problem gambling are extremely important to know. The club I gambled in claims it adhered to all the legislation governing its activities and responsibilities. BUT they were negligent in my case and breached enacted codes of conduct and regulations governing gaming machines. They did not have a gambling contact officer on duty and if any staff were trained in recognising problem gamblers they did not act on their suspicions. I interacted with staff yet no-one intervened.

(d) methods currently used to treat problem gamblers

I found help with my problem gambling by searching on the internet for a counselling service. I was in crisis and needed immediate access to help. As I was in trouble with finances I also needed a free service. As gambling had become a major addictive problem, I found it particularly beneficial to be able to see a counsellor on a regular and frequent (weekly) basis and to be able to attend weekly group meetings.

Such services need to be free and geographically accessible. They need to provide one-to-one counselling and group support. Importantly gambling not only affects the problem gambler but also their partners, families and relatives. Assistance must be available to these individuals as well in order for them to understand problem gambling and cope with the personal and financial stress that problem gambling has created. Counselling services fulfil a number of important roles:

- Crisis management
- Strategies to help problem gamblers stop gambling
- Education about problem gambling
- Ongoing support

Counselling services need to be available on a very frequent basis (e.g. weekly) and provide ongoing support over a relatively long recovery period (e.g. upwards of a year).

I believe both a “carrot and stick” approach needs to be adopted to stop problem gambling. A problem gambler needs to choose not to gamble for positive reasons as well as the negative impacts of their gambling. I have excluded myself from gaming venues – I see this as just one very practical method to help me stop gambling. Obviously if I don’t have access to poker machines then I can’t

gamble but equally importantly the more time I spend away from pokies, the less is their addictive power i.e. this is akin to an alcoholic 'drying out' or a smoker or drug addict going on detox.

(e) summary

My problem gambling has been devastating for my partner and me. Gaming venues must take responsibility for the "product" they are marketing and selling. Poker machines are not a "safe" entertainment product – they impose significant risk to the consumer. This needs to be recognised and moderated by legislation. Clubs also have a duty of care to their patrons and must be held account to existing codes of conduct and regulations.