

Joint select committee on gambling reform

Inquiry into the prevention and treatment of problem gambling

Julia Karpathakis: Manager Pokies Anonymous

Introduction

I called together our Pokies Anonymous group for a consultation evening to gather their ideas for this submission. We became so disheartened as one of our members came all the way from Salisbury only to express his anger and disappointment in how nothing gets done and that the consultation is a complete waste of time and that nothing will change because the politicians don't care and he left. The atmosphere of our discussion changed with the feeling that not many politicians seem to care about the voices of the addicts who have fallen victim to these "evil and horrible soul destroying machines disguised as entertainment".

This submission is about getting real. We are sick of nothing happening. A mandatory pre commitment scheme would have solved many problems and saved many lives. It would help lift a heavy burden on our community. Everyone who has been affected by the pokies is hugely disappointed by the decision to scrap Mandatory pre commitment, so let's get real. We need to get serious and we want the message out there for people to see and not with the pretence that something is being done! Too slow - while we are writing submissions others are getting huge wages to listen and the barons are getting richer, people are dying, families are being destroyed and generally speaking quality of life going downhill. In Pokies Anonymous we have many success stories; however what is happening to the people who are so addicted that they can't stand the thought of stopping? They come once or twice; they know they want to stop, that they have to stop but cant. I will tell you they disappear out there unable to help themselves, too ashamed because they can't help themselves. They get divorced; lose access to their children as they have lost their homes because they can't pay rent. Then they lose their cars and any self worth they had.

I am sick of nothing getting done and so are thousands of others. Why is no one listening? We have campaigns, many people that really care for the welfare of the victims, including people like myself working so hard to help people. We have petitions and yet there is NOTHING serious happening. Why do only a few people benefit from this "business" and so many vulnerable people suffer? It is out of balance and unfair and everyone knows this and they pretend it's not happening. This is how it feels to me and thousands of others.

Terms of reference

The prevention and treatment of problem gambling, with particular reference to:

(a) Measures to prevent problem gambling, including:

(i) Use and display of responsible gambling messages,

Firstly “Gamble Responsibly” makes absolutely no sense to a person who has become addicted to the pokies, it’s too late! Also it is confusing to the person as it may make them think they are the only one with a problem that other people can gamble responsibly and that they can’t. This phrase may cause them to never reach out for help with feelings of shame for being out of control.

The term “Gamble Responsibly” can be displayed in the foyer as people come in, however once in the venue there must be warning signs e.g. “BEWARE! Playing the pokies can cause addiction, if you believe you are addicted call the help line 1800 060 757”. I also believe visual representation of what can happen when a person gets addicted should be displayed like on the cigarette packets, for example a person with empty pockets out turned, an eviction notice, (I have created a range of images that may be used for this purpose). This will be of great benefit also to our multicultural community it will have a greater effect and be inclusive.

Mandatory breaks in play will be of great benefit as I explain in my submission to the “IGA Codes of Practice review 2011”. Stopping the machine at intervals will allow the player to have to stop and think about their behaviour and not by their own choice; therefore they cannot just continue in that “frenzy” of the addiction. Being in a “trance”, in the “zone” and “under hypnosis” are words used by individuals in the groups to describe how they feel when out of control due to the trickery of the pokies. It will allow them to stop go to the toilet have a drink or eat. These basic behaviours are usually delayed due to playing non-stop, under the trance. During this time they may re consider and hopefully leave the venue before they lose the lot. As an ex pokie addict I believe this would have helped me so much as it would have been like someone tapping me on the shoulder and waking me up telling me that is enough now and snap me out of it.

I remember going to Darwin in 1997 and the first thing I wanted to do was go to the casino. I hired a baby sitter and went that evening. It was horrible for an addict like me as I proceeded to change my money they filled up the cup with coins. I was ready, all excited to play, only to find the reels moved really slowly so it annoyed me to the point where I gave up after spending six hundred dollars instead of maybe six thousand dollars. Although this was annoying it helped me not lose the lot! I feel that starving the reels and the near miss trickery must be stopped. This not only gives a false appearance of winning the next round but is a part of sucking people in to spend more and more and keep them in front of the machine causing the addiction.

I believe that messages to jolt people out of the trance will be of great use. These messages will trigger people to have to think about their outer surroundings and real life and to change the focus from the make-believe and isolated world of the pokies of to the real world out there.

Examples of “Pop Ups”

- DO YOU HAVE FOOD
- DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH PETROL
- DID YOU PICK UP THE CHILDREN
- YOU ARE NOT ALONE - ASK FOR HELP
- ARE YOUR BILLS DUE
- DID YOU PAY THE MORTGAGE
- POKIES WILL TAKE ALL YOUR MONEY
- REACH OUT FOR HELP 1800 060 757
- IS THE RENT DUE
- DONT BE ASHAMED TO REACH OUT FOR HELP TODAY
- DO YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT TODAY
- ASK THE VENUE STAFF FOR HELP

(ii) Use, access and effectiveness of other information on risky or problem gambling, including campaigns,

People out there need educating about the dangers of playing the pokies. It is a highly addictive product presented as fun and entertainment. If any of the people reading this submission would take the time to come to one of our meetings they would be given a great insight as to how horrific this problem is - real people with real stories of hell. I truly admire and am amazed by the guts people have to even seek help out there. In the group meetings we often organise DVD presentations to educate members on superstition, on Skinner and the pigeon experiments and human conditioning, how a pokie machine works from the inside, how the reels are rigged and generally burst the bubble for people who come to seek help who are still living in fantasy land believing they are lucky and can't stop just yet, they know it's wrong but they still think they are lucky! Even after they have lost their job, then their family, then their home, and are now pawning off their vehicle.

During my seven years with Pokies Anonymous I have seen many people struggle and call themselves losers. We know and therefore help them understand they are not losers at all. I was being interviewed on a Greek radio program one day and a person telephoned me really angry and frustrated, he said "it is like as if I invite you to my home and as soon as you walk in the door you fall into a trap", in other words pokies venues are saying "yes you're welcome, come and have fun", all the while knowing full well you may develop an addiction. We now know we have been affected only because we were oblivious to the elaborate trickery the psychologists and experts on human behaviour put into creating this "sophisticated rat trap". We are not losers.

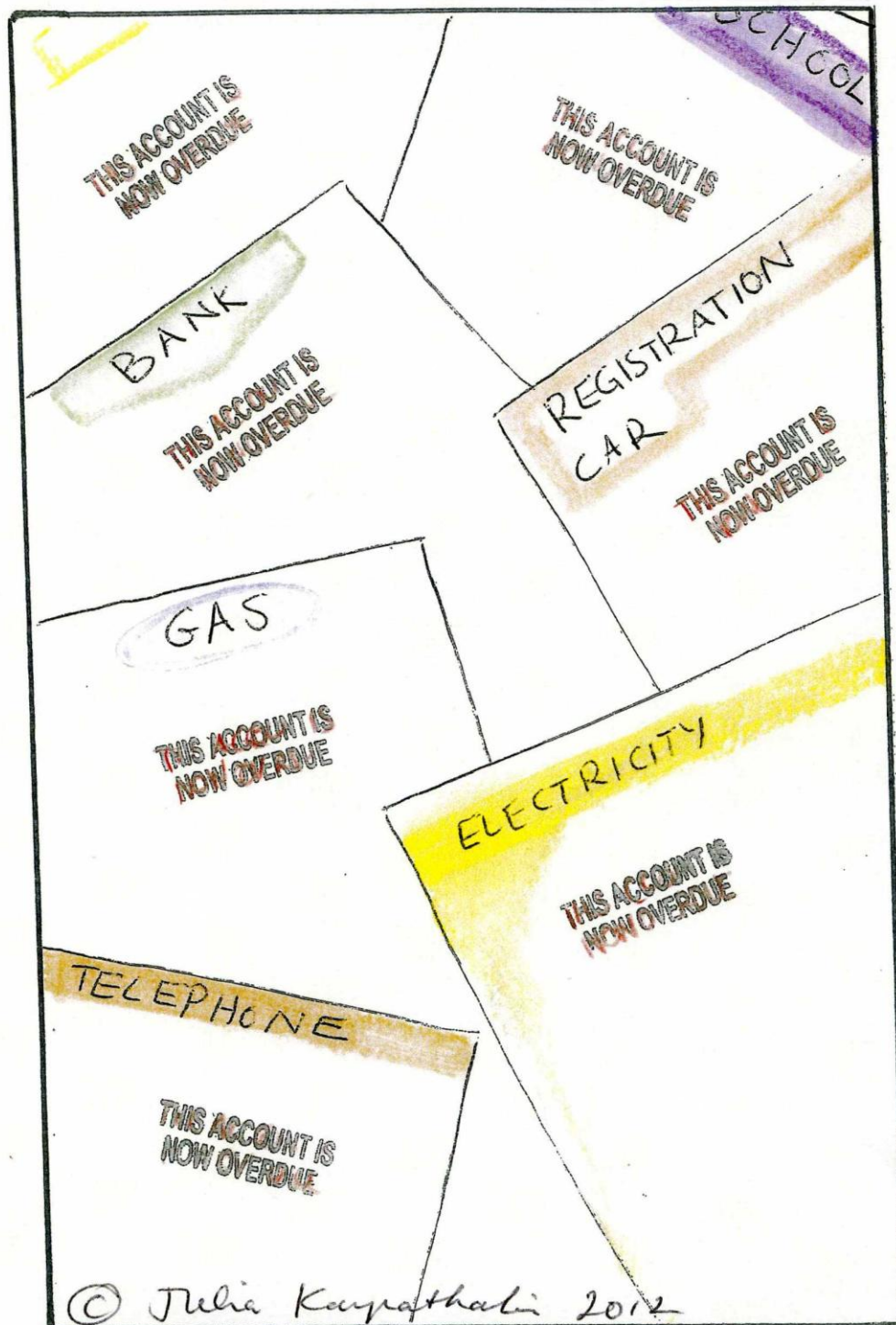
The government of NSW have a really useful and explicit DVD called "Myths and Facts". Pokies Anonymous use this in our presentations and also on our DVD nights. It is useful as it is simple to understand and the imagery is plain, making it accessible to many cultures. We have presented in the Greek Community.

I notice there is absolutely no advertising on television now. When there was many years ago it was not obvious or easy to understand and on at hours when most people are asleep. One member remembers an advertisement which was very effective - a girl with a piggy bank and the parent saying to the child I will give it back - and another suggestion of a good campaign was the "Win back your life" targeted to the youth and was played on radio station "Fresh FM" and on the web page "National Foundation of Problem Gambling". We must advertise as often and as obvious as the anti smoking commercials. Advertising slogans and images on buses, trams, billboards and news papers that depict the dangers of pokie addiction. As I spoke about in the last section, images like they put on the cigarette packets, a person with empty out turned pockets, an empty fridge, eviction notices, a for sale sign on a home. I have a collection of images that may be suitable for ideas or to use as is. Here are some examples:

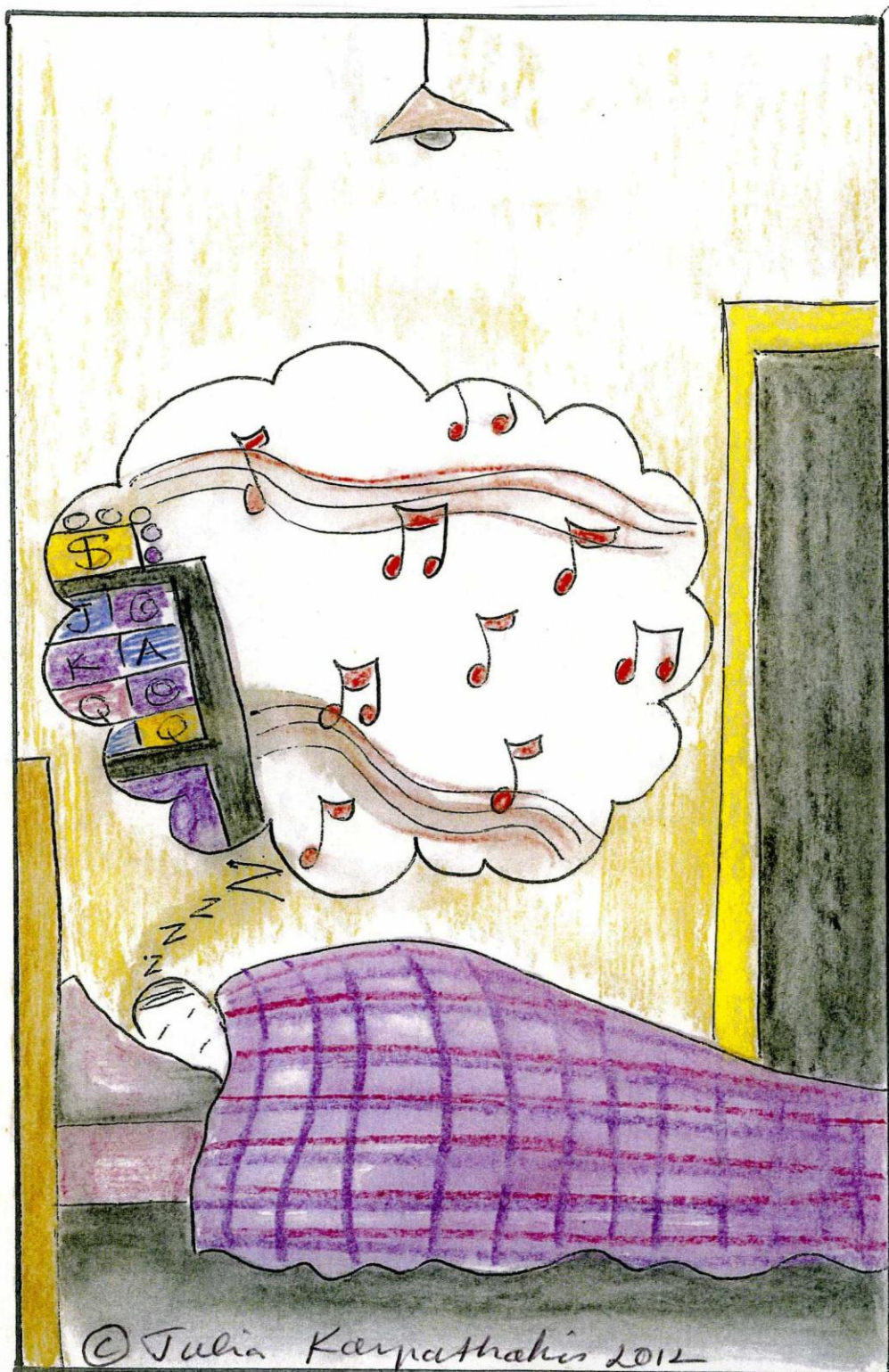
"THE POKIES RUINED MY MARRIAGE"



"I NEVER PAY MY BILLS ON TIME BECAUSE I PLAY THE POKIES"



**"I CAN HEAR THE SOUND AND MUSIC IN MY
SLEEP ... I FEEL HYPNOTISED BY THE POKIES"**



**"MONEY BECOMES FAKE TO ME AND EASY TO
THROW AWAY WHEN I PLAY THE POKIES"**



"I BECAME A LIAR BECAUSE I PLAY THE POKIES"



© Julia Kayathakur

**"SOMETIMES I CAN'T FEED THE CAT BECAUSE I
SPEND ALL MY MONEY AT THE POKIES"**



© Tullia Kaiyathakis 2012

**"OUR FRIDGE WAS ALWAYS EMPTY WHEN MUM
PLAYED THE POKIES"**



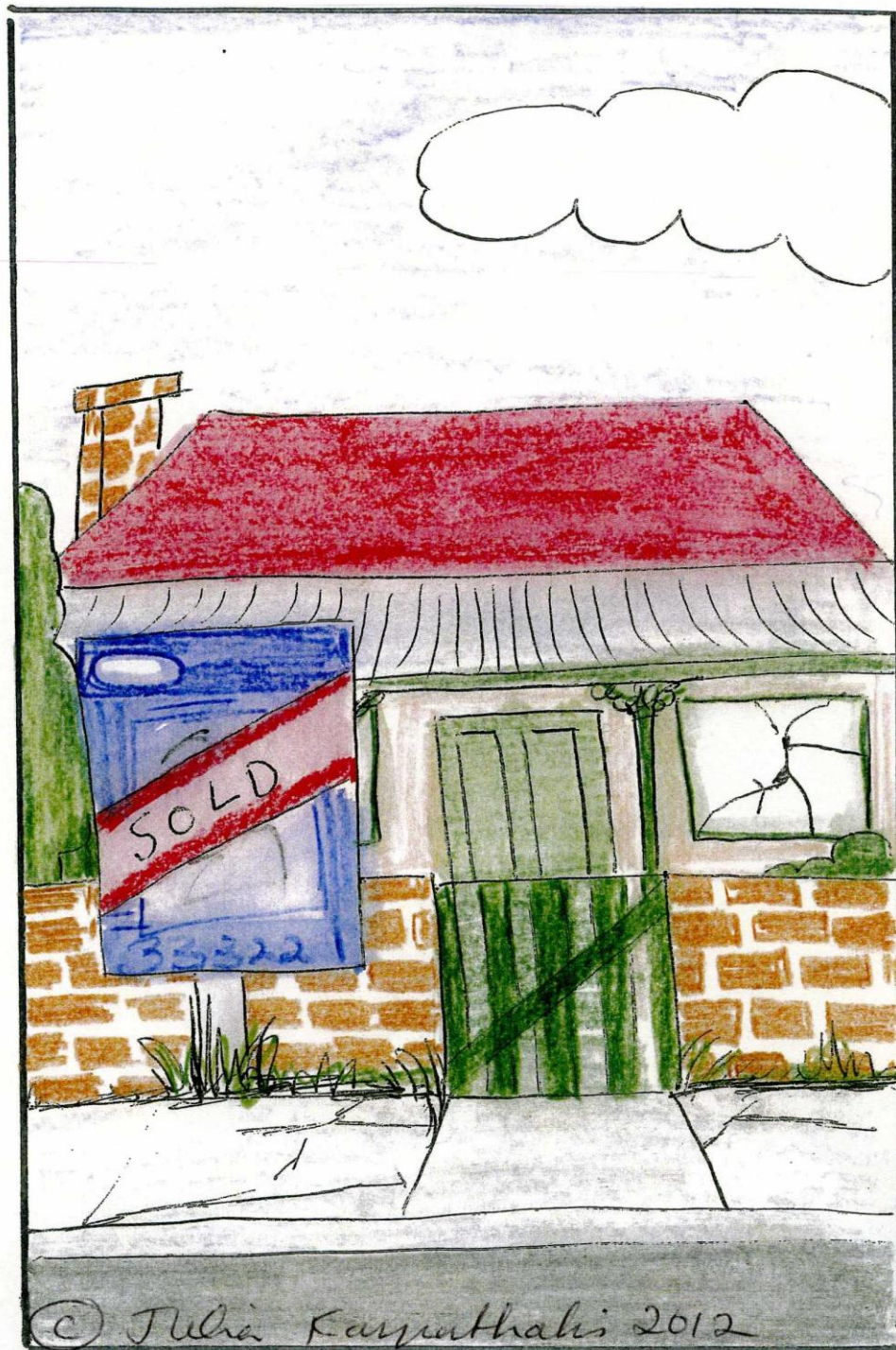
"I HAVE TO HIDE MY BANK STATEMENT IN CASE
SOMEONE FINDS OUT HOW MUCH I WASTE AT
THE POKIES"

BANK STATEMENT

12.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....100.00
15.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....1,000.00
20.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
20.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
20.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
20.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
20.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....300.00
21.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
22.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
25.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
25.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
25.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....200.00
27.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....80.00
27.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
28.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
29.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
29.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....20.00
29.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
29.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....50.00
29.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....100.00
30.11.07 Withdraw ATM ... PUB.....100.00

© Nisha Kanyasulkam 2012

"I HAD TO SELL MY FAMILY HOME THAT MY PARENTS WORKED HARD TO PAY OFF BECAUSE I PLAY THE POKIES"



(i) Ease of access to assistance for problem gambling;

Members described the disappointment of the long waiting time to be barred and or to see counsellors. They also expressed concern that the barring list of venues is limited as the IGA form only give you enough space to write the name of four or five venues. Clients wish to be given more options and many people express confusion as to why they can't be barred from every pokie venue in S.A.

Politicians must make themselves more available. That the Gambling Help Line does not list all the help services. Many elderly people do not have access to the internet to even see the services available. They think the venues should have a stand that holds flyers and information of all the different services that are available that they can take home with them. Or one business card size card that unfolds to reveal ALL the services.

(b) Measures which can encourage risky gambling behaviour, including:

(i) Marketing strategies

Members of Pokies Anonymous have shown concern about the advertising of times the venues are open and of the huge signage outside the pubs and clubs, including the sandwich boards. These signs are a constant reminder and a trigger for people in the recovery process. These signs must be eliminated. Bill boards advertising the negative effects of the pokies must go up for all to see including advertising on buses, trams and taxis.

Unsubscribing patrons from J cards and reward cards must be made easier and the Birthday and Christmas letters sent out to patrons must be stopped too. Many members come to me to help them to not receive any more mail from the venues as they were not successful themselves.

Pop-ups on the internet are a big issue with our members. Here is an example of the type of pop-up that people see:



Fun Flash Slots
playflashslots.com



Play desert-themed fast action flash pokies, Captain's Treasure and more. Click here!

Love Slots?



Play slots free on facebook today!

Love Slots?



Show off your skills in the best social slot game on Facebook. Grab your FREE chips here now!

Slot Machines- FREE!



Go Play Now!

New Slots Game!



Go Play Now!

Best Bingo Games



Play Slots and Bingo Online. Quick & Fun Bingo games No credit card or deposit required. Free.

Like 5,760 people like this.

Best Bingo Games



Play Slots and Bingo Online. Quick & Fun Bingo games No credit card or deposit required. Free.

Like 4,518 people like this.

Best Bingo Games



Play Bingo, Slots, Pulkabs, Scratchcards, Chat Games. Register for Free and collect a sign up bonus now.

Best Bingo Games



Play Slots and Bingo Online. Quick & Easy Bingo games No credit card or deposit required. Free.

Sweetest Slot on earth



Spin our Sweets Slot as quickly as you can and become the slots sweetheart!

New Slots Game!



Go Play Now!

We ask for them to be removed but they are like a plague invading our space and they don't listen either. The group expressed concern for the new interactive machines and how much more addictive they will be.

The removal of ATMs – and the eradication of the high intensity machines and for the machines to maximum bet one dollar.

(ii) Use of inducements/ incentives to gamble;

I believe that the entrance to the pokie area must be completely separate and not connected to the eating and bar areas as this is an incentive and an inducement to gamble. Even if a person's intention was to go out to dinner, having full view of the pokies may influence a change of plan and they may end up in the pokie area instead. Another example is when one buys a drink or dinner they give people dollar coins in change which triggers people to think I will put these few dollars in the machine while I wait for dinner. The pokies must be out of view of children and dining patrons. The sounds and view of the pokies completely ruins the dining atmosphere for many people. I have personally witnessed parents taking turns to go to the pokies whilst the child or children are waiting. The pokies being out of sight and not within easy reach will stop this distraction from a family dining outing. I believe the pokies create tension instead of a relaxed family atmosphere and it is depressing watching the same people going up and down changing their money knowing they are losing. I know many people will not go to venues with pokies to eat especially if they are in view. The group also did not like the serving food out to patrons and having snacks around the machines including lollies. This encourages people to stay longer and to have the false feeling that they are being looked after by being served.

(c) Early intervention strategies and training of staff;

At the last Parliamentary Hearing for Pokie Reforms in January 2011 I proposed a plan called the 'Ask Me' project. This would involve having two people at a time visiting pokie venues wearing a t-shirts with the logo "ASK ME". Basically they go out and walk around the venue and ask people how they are, hopefully they may strike up a conversation where the "ask me" person can then offer help if the gambler asks for it, for example by letting the gambler know about services and how they can get help. I know that it is terribly difficult for staff to approach clients in the venues. How does one do this? The staff has to get to know their client well before they can actually say anything in case the client runs off. I know I would have run off if someone approached me to ask if I had a problem or if I was ok. This way it's up to the client and their curiosity to ask "what's this about". This will enable the staff to do what they do and take that burden off them and shift the job to the "ask me" people and this will look like it's an external initiative - the client may even approach the staff member after they have gone. I do not know if this will work, but it will be worth giving it a go.

Early intervention...

(d) Methods currently used to treat problem gamblers and the level of knowledge and use of them, including:

(i) Counselling

It's unfortunate that when a person has the courage and reaches out for help they are told to wait for two weeks before they can be seen, and when they are seen for a few times they are then moved on to another counsellor and have to repeat the same information to the new counsellor or be faced with an answering machine. Another one of the biggest complaints I hear in the groups is also that the counsellor doesn't understand the problem as they have never played the pokies. I believe counselling is useful however this is what is said over and over again by people attending Pokies Anonymous. Let's train up ex pokie addicts as counsellors specific to pokies; I believe we will have more people attend the services if we do. This must be funded by the government and then as part of the ex pokie addict's rehabilitation will help them recover their lives financially and with purpose.

(ii) Education

I believe we must present educational sessions for schools, which include a person who has been through this problem and is willing to share their story. They could also show a DVD about the inside of the machines, explaining how they work and the trickery that's used to suck people into thinking they will win. There could also be a discussion around luck and superstition. All of these things need to be told to the youth, because they are who will be the victims of potentially a horrific future that they may never recover from.

I use language like "trickery" and "sucked in" as we need to cater for this kind of thinking as well, not only the responsible gambling slogan "which is better than nothing" however there are angry people out there that need to be understood with real language to help identify at this level, then take action to get help. This is why an ex pokie addict will be the most effective in reaching out to people who are still suffering. We make it real for up and coming youth that may not know that the pokies may ruin their lives. It needs to be said STRAIGHT OUT!

Pokies Anonymous has created presentations for the Greek Community in particular St Constantine and St Helen church in Goodwood through Father Petros. We are ready. We feel we will be the best people to do it because we are willing to go out there and educate people through these presentations. We would love to go out to all areas to present, including rural areas and interstate. Once again the government must fund this and help us to deliver.

(iii) self – exclusion;

Self exclusion - this is interesting. One can self exclude and still get away with going into the venue. We have had a person in our group who wore a wig and still went in. I have had people in the group who tested themselves and the venue and gone in without being noticed. I understand it is up to the individual not to go in once excluded. This works for many people but not for others.