

Relationships Australia

NATIONAL OFFICE

30 June 2011

Ms Lyn Beverley
Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Beverley,

Submission into Australian Online Gambling and Advertising

Introduction

This submission is written on behalf of the federation of Relationships Australia organisations. Four of our member organisations, namely Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, provide specialist counselling and support for problem gamblers and their families. This submission takes into account their views in particular.

Each Relationships Australia organisation provides a range of services including relationship counselling, family support and family dispute resolution. Services are funded by the Commonwealth Departments of Attorney-General, and Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, as well as State and Territory Governments. Gambling support programs in the above four jurisdictions are funded by their respective State Governments.

We are committed to social justice and inclusion, and respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships.

Submission

Relationships Australia provides gambling support services in Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, and deals indirectly with the consequences of problem gambling when providing counselling and mediation services in all states and territories.

The enhancement of relationships and family life in their various forms, through counselling, mediation, education, professional training and the foundation of social policy

Currently the Relationships Australia gambling support services mainly see clients who attend gambling venues, and Relationships Australia staff work closely with the management of local gambling services to promote support programs. Relationships Australia practitioners are aware of and concerned about the growth of online gambling (growing at a rate of between 10-20 percent per year) and subtle and direct forms of advertising that seek to normalise gambling. Relationship Australia would like to express the following concerns about gambling advertising and online gambling activities:

- **The negative consequences of problem gambling are the same as other forms of gambling but have the potential to be greater**

Relationships Australia's experience in working with online gamblers indicates that the negative outcomes of excessive gambling are the same for online gamblers as for gamblers who attend a venue: there can be major financial losses, negative impacts on intimate and family relationships, friendships, employment and health, including mental health. The ease of access to online gambling and its 24-hour-a-day, at work, in a café and at home availability could even exacerbate these negative outcomes as gamblers are in a position to lose more money faster with the use of credit cards. The wide availability of gambling opportunities can add to the fantasy element of gambling, the belief that the person will win. Regular gambling may lead to problem gambling for a significant proportion of people, and the wide accessibility of gambling opportunities contributes to the development of problem gambling.

Additionally, access to gambling via mobile devices has the potential to keep gambling habits more secretive, thus not giving partners and friends the opportunity to help in resisting opportunities.

- **Normalisation of gambling – impact of advertising and online access to gaming and betting**

The spread of gambling into new areas (sport and politics, for example) and the proliferation of gambling advertising have the effect of normalising it. Relationships Australia supports the government in its push to have sporting commentators remove betting references from their commentaries or face regulation. Australians laid out \$611m online sports betting in 2010. The normalising of betting has the strong possibility of creating gambling patterns in young people, especially males, who follow a sport. Males are three times more likely to gamble than females, so the link with sports betting cannot be ignored. It has already had the impact of removing the fun and exuberance of following a team on some people whose concern has shifted to betting and winning on multiple occasions during a game.

Gambling advertising and promotion is now a normal part of sport reporting, in all forms of media. Online gambling advertising is not limited to gambling sites; ads appear alongside general interest online news items. Although advertising might be ignored by people who do not gamble, it is a constant inducement to those who have become interested in gambling.

- **Impact on youth**

Relationships Australia has serious concerns about the unregulated growth of online gambling and increased gambling advertising on young people. Young people are highly technologically savvy and the group most likely to adopt new ways of doing things. Mobile devices make gambling instantly available

wherever a person is, at any time of the day or night. As Sally Gainsbury points out, both Australian and International studies show that internet gamblers are more likely to be young.¹

Young people have witnessed the normalisation of sports betting, and, for some, the innocent stakeless wager with a parent over which team will win, will have turned into a regular online bet, albeit starting with small stakes.

Children and young people who have a parent with a gambling problem can be more exposed to gambling and parental mood swings if the parent is gambling from home. This has the potential to put more stress on family relationships. Young people whose parents do not bet can easily become aware of the many and easy opportunities for gambling.

- **Support for regulation**

Nothing is to be gained by driving gambling underground. Relationships Australia supports consistent, national regulation of the gaming industry across Australia and consistent regulation of the nature and conditions for gambling advertising. Regulation of advertising has precedents in tobacco and alcohol marketing in Australia. Many changes are possible: for example, there can be limits of the placement of pop-up advertisements online, and on 'lures' when using a search engine, on sporting commentaries and radio chat show references.

Online gambling has no spending limits and there are no exclusion programs associated with it.

- **Support for continuing research**

Relationships Australia acknowledges the importance of work undertaken by Australian researchers like Sally Gainsbury, Alex Blaszczyński, J.G. Phillips and Simone Rodda and others, but there is a need for significantly more research and data collection about online gambling and gambling advertising in Australia. Relationships Australia supports research in this area, including research as to how best to regulate the gambling industry and ongoing research into how to best support those with a gambling problem. Other research could consider the co-morbidities that can exist with gambling – use of alcohol and prevalence of domestic violence for example. It is known that use of online gambling is increasing, but more needs to be known about the habits and demographics of its users, including whether online gambling is in addition to other forms of gambling, or is becoming a dominant form of gambling for some. Relationships Australia sees it as a responsibility of the gambling and sporting industries to fund research and to adopt the recommendations arising from such research.

- **Support and education for online gamblers**

Education about the dangers of online gambling comes with the danger that it might draw attention to its attractions, but support is essential for those whose gambling leads them into financial and personal trouble. There is evidence that online therapy for gambling can be helpful to some, and there is agreement amongst Relationships Australia gambling support practitioners that they are only seeing a small number of those who need help. It is important to promote services to on-line gamblers and that more resources are directed into support programs. It needs to be remembered that those close to the problem gambler - partners, parents and children - need to be supported as well. These people may

¹ Response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Gambling, p5; Journal of National Association of Gambling Studies Vol. 22 Nov 2010

have been hurt by the problem gambler and suffered financial loss, but are the same people who will be vital to the person's recovery.

Summary

Relationships Australia has serious concerns about the rapid take-up of online gambling and its associated advertising and welcomes the Parliamentary inquiry into its effects. Thank you for considering the issues raised in our submission.

Yours sincerely

ALISON BROOK

National Executive Officer