

No 'Cents' In Claim; Smith Defends New Penny Slots

By Frank Landry

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MANITOBA – Lotteries Minister Scott Smith is defending his new penny slots and rejecting accusations the machines will serve as a gateway for some to more high-stakes gambling.

"It's an age-old argument -- that if you smoke a joint then you're going to start taking cocaine," Smith told The Sun yesterday. "That's sheer nonsense."

Smith said the Manitoba government will not take the 140 machines out of service, as was suggested last week by the Opposition Tories.

Last month, Manitoba Lotteries took existing slot machines at the Club Regent and McPhillips Street Station casinos and converted them so they would accept pennies. The machines also accept bills.

Players can wager between one cent and \$5, depending on the game.

Tory gambling critic Ron Schuler said Smith is "trivializing" drug use with his comments and not taking the problem of gambling addiction seriously.

"I have never seen anyone who has come forward and said, 'I walked into a casino and within two minutes, I had an addiction to gambling,'" Schuler said. "They will all tell you it started in a very small way."

'SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE ENJOY'

Gerry Kolesar, supervisor of problem gambling services with the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, said he wasn't aware of the penny slots until reading about them in The Sun.

He said he doesn't know of any studies that show people who start playing penny slots move to higher denominations.

"I wouldn't be concerned about people playing penny machines then starting to play quarter machines," Kolesar said.

However, Kolesar noted "there's a lot of debate" about whether smoking marijuana can lead to harder drugs.

Smith said penny slots are found in casinos across North America and "are something that people enjoy."

"I don't believe putting a penny in a machine is different then putting a nickel into a machine," Smith said. "People may want to sit with 200 pennies and enjoy themselves for a few hours with \$2."

Smith said there are no plans to have more than 140 penny slots -- or 70 at each of the two casinos.

"People that are playing with a nickel, I would suggest, are the same people that would be playing with a penny," Smith said.