

Addiction: The dark side of gaming

By Janet French

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SASKATOON – It was hard enough going through a divorce after 36 years of marriage. But Gerry, then 60, had just retired from the bench, and the long days at court that once occupied his time were gone.

The Moose Jaw man said he was drawn to video lottery terminals and slot machines because of "a rotten attitude" and "a 'poor me' trip" he was taking.

His new pastime turned from fun to fixation. Some days, when called out to work as a relief judge, he'd long for court to adjourn early if there was a casino in town. When the Moose Jaw casino opened in 2002, he'd leave a couple hours early for his volunteer shifts at a long-term care home to spend time in front of the slots.

"Once it got ahold of me, I needed to be there, so I made sure I organized my gambling around the things," Gerry, a member of Gamblers Anonymous, said. "I was a busy guy, but it didn't matter a rat's ass."

At his peak, Gerry was spending three hours a day in the casino, except Sundays.

Eventually, he was fibbing to his new wife, telling her meetings he'd attended had stretched on, when really, he had been in the casino. "You lie to yourself first, and then to others," Gerry, now 70, said.

Eventually, the judge, who'd retired comfortably, had racked up an estimated \$50,000 in debt, maxed out his credit cards, and had to mortgage his home to pay what was owed.

"I cheated my second wife," Gerry said. "(The house is) the one thing I had for her as security in the event of my demise . . . There is no security like that for her anymore."

THE PROBLEM

On its Web site, Gamblers Anonymous describes a compulsive gambler as someone unwilling to accept reality, who uses gambling to escape, or who is emotionally insecure when not gambling, among other attributes.

Other signs, according to a Gamblers Anonymous checklist, include borrowing to finance gambling, gambling beyond your financial means, trying to win back money previously lost, and reluctance to use "gambling money" to pay for expenses like food or utilities.

In Saskatchewan, a 2002 government report says an estimated 1.2 per cent of the province's population, or between 5,600 to 13,200 adults, are problem gamblers. The telephone survey, performed in 2001 and analysed in the report, "Gambling and Problem Gambling in Saskatchewan," says another 4.7 per cent of the province, or as many as 42,400 people, are "moderate risk" gamblers, and another 9.3 per cent, or as many as 79,800 adults, are low-risk gamblers.

Report author Harold Wynne, from Ottawa's Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, said in the report it's hard to compare how gambling has changed in the province over time, since similar previous surveys used a different method to classify people's gambling risks.

The Health Department is working on another study that should help them identify such a trend, said Rick Kilarski, director of research evaluation and central support in the community care branch.

But Ian Schofield, a bankruptcy trustee in Regina and Yorkton and a partner with Meyers Norris Penny, said 10 years ago people seeking his help because of a gambling problem was "very rare."

"You get a lot of people, when you ask them what the cause of their bankruptcy was, sort of go, 'meh,'" he said. "They don't really answer. It used to be that it was drinking or drugs, or something. Our automatic assumption these days is that if somebody isn't forthcoming, that it was gambling."

Schofield estimated about 10 per cent of the cases he deals with are a result of problem gambling.

"You never used to see people over 65 (considering bankruptcy)," he said. "Now, if you get folks who are over 65 who come in to talk to you, almost invariably, (gambling) seems to be the reason."

Part of the problem, said Harley Dickinson, a professor and head of sociology at the University of Saskatchewan, is gamblers have a poor understanding of how VLTs and slot machines are programmed to keep players hooked.

"The pace of play, and also the activities -- the lights and the sounds and the movement that are associated with it (make them appealing,)" he said.

On many slot machines, the player will see symbols above and below the icons that line up to determine a win or loss, he said.

"Often, the subsequent or preceding row has your winning symbol in it," Dickinson said. "A lot of people who are prone to gambling problems view this as they almost won, not that they lost . . . It just reinforces pumping the coins and pushing the buttons."

Once lured into problem gaming, escape can be difficult.

John, a 56-year-old Prince Albert man, became a regular at the city's Northern Lights Casino when it opened in 1996. He started going with friends, then by himself on weeknights, sometimes for four or five hours a night.

As a single man, then in his 40s, he justified his casino time as something he did to avoid staying home alone.

Then a teacher, the school year was about to begin, and John realized he had no money. Although he's never counted his losses, he estimated he gambled away between \$70,000 and \$100,000.

He quit for a while, but John couldn't stay away from the casino. He'd have a few good weeks, then slip. The cycle went on until 2001, when John decided to ban himself from the casino.

The casino had his picture, and if security guards saw him come in, they would kick him out. If he tried three times, staff would call the police and charge him with trespassing. "That was enough incentive for me not to go," he said.

THE EFFECTS

Meanwhile, John had become involved with Gamblers Anonymous and got a job helping other problem gamblers.

In 2003, he was on a trip to Edmonton when his car broke down. Frustrated and angry, he paid a visit to West Edmonton Mall, and found a casino.

"At first, I thought, 'Well, I'll just go in and check it out,' " he said. "Before I knew it, I had a big, big slip there."

John was furious at himself. His job working with problem gamblers was in jeopardy.

"I was an emotional wreck," he said. "I remember going into my boss' office and crying, and saying, 'I know if you want to fire me, I'll understand.' "

She didn't -- John's boss thanked him for his honesty and told him to get back on track.

John's gambling problem has affected him physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, he says. He developed high blood pressure and diabetes, was diagnosed with depression and put on antidepressant medication.

Gambling was on his mind all the time. He said he couldn't concentrate on anything else.

"I was either numb from all feelings, or I would go to the other extreme, where I would cry for no reason," John said. "It's a very cunning and deceitful disease."

Compulsive gambling can spill into the lives of the gambler's families, friends, and colleagues, Dickinson said.

"Social problems really come from the activities associated with trying to chase your losses -- stealing money, taking money through misrepresentation, from family, from friends, from employers," he said. "Doing this a few times pretty much destroys any sense of trust social relationships in families are built upon. I think a lot of families just collapse under the erosion of trust that problem gamblers introduce as they pursue their addiction."

Although he never broke the law, Gerry said he was "a different guy" when he was in the throes of his gambling problem.

"I was, in effect, by this addiction, stealing time from my wife, and probably from her mother, who's an aged person we try to help," Gerry said.

One of his sons, a civil servant, was "disgusted" when he learned of his father's compulsion. "He's pretty anti-gambling, period, without knowing about (me)," Gerry said.

The last day he gambled was Dec. 27, 2002, when his wife, well aware of his problem, said she was going to a lawyer to find out her rights.

Affluent people with good jobs have more to lose from a gambling problem because they have access to so much credit, bankruptcy trustee Schofield said.

"It isn't hard to run up the debt," he said. "(One client) had gone from having a house paid for to remortgaging to the hilt."

A few even lose their lives to gambling.

Recovering gambler John said he once coaxed a man away from suicide who had lost everything to compulsive gambling and feared the fury of his wife.

Kent Stewart, Saskatchewan's chief coroner, said he knows of one gambling-related suicide in the province in the past six months. Although it's hard to track, there's no evidence of an epidemic number of gambling-related suicides in Saskatchewan, he said.

THE SOLUTIONS

The Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA), which runs four of the province's casinos, takes compulsive gambling seriously and is about to roll out new strategies to tackle the problem, said Pat Cook, vice-president of corporate affairs.

"We provide a form of entertainment, and we hope that people enjoy that in the appropriate way," she said.

"If they're not, we also try to be responsible about it, by providing information and awareness."

This year, all of SIGA's 12,000 employees will receive training on problem gambling and how they can deal with it in the casinos, Cook said.

Front-line staff will be trained to look for "red flag" behaviours, like customers who are visibly upset (such as banging on their machine, or crying), clients who appear to be losing control, or patrons who approach staff asking for help.

Higher level managers will receive more in-depth training to be able to deal with escalating situations, she said. Although a manager may sit down and talk with a customer about their concerns, casino staff are not equipped to counsel patrons -- just point them to a place they can get help. Training begins in May, Cook said.

Each casino will also have new information kiosks called "responsible gaming centres," where patrons can use a digital tool to get information on where to get help. Together, the initiatives cost SIGA \$175,000 this year, Cook said.

Although customers can also choose to ban themselves from SIGA casinos, Cook wouldn't say how many clients have taken that route, citing privacy concerns.

Every year, another \$1.5 million of SIGA's earnings goes to the First Nation Addiction Rehabilitation Foundation (FNARF), a fund formed by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations in 1995 to prevent and treat compulsive gaming.

The province's 2002 report on problem gaming indicates aboriginals are particularly at risk -- the survey found aboriginals are 10 times more likely to be problem gamblers. About 15 per cent of gamblers in the province were found to be "at risk" of having a gambling problem, whereas nearly 50 per cent of aboriginals are considered at risk to be compulsive gamblers.

Those numbers are "alarming, and should be cause for great concern for FSIN and the Province of Saskatchewan," said FSIN second vice-chief Guy Lonechild.

That aboriginal people are more greatly impacted by problem gambling than the general population creates an "overwhelming sense of urgency" for the FSIN to beef up prevention programs targeted at children and families, he said.

FNARF runs two treatment centres for problem gambling -- one through the Prince Albert Grand Council Problem Gambling Centre and another through the File Hills

Qu'Appelle Tribal Council. Both offer inpatient and outpatient programs. Those programs aren't enough, said Lonechild.

"(FNARF) is drastically, drastically underfunded in terms in some of the need that has been identified out there," he said. "That \$1.5 million is stretched way too thin."

The FSIN is in the midst of negotiating a new gaming framework agreement with the province. In those negotiations, Lonechild said the FSIN is asking for at least another \$500,000 a year for FNARF. He wants more money for research into how extensive problem gambling is among aboriginals, more treatment centres, and for education programs, particularly targeted at youth.

In addition to channeling gaming revenue to FNARF, the provincial government also spends \$2.5 million a year tackling problem gambling, including \$866,000 on prevention, says the Health Department's Kilarski.

The department pays for province-wide media campaigns about the signs of problem gambling and to convince those who may have a problem to seek help. Money also pays for a permanent exhibit on problem gaming at the Saskatchewan Science Centre and for educational resources for teachers.

The rest of the government funding goes to treatment programs and research, Kilarski said.

Counselling is available in all the province's health regions. In the 2005-06 operating year, 471 people sought counselling for problem gambling, he said.

Fifty-seven of those people also went to day treatment programs in Regina and Saskatoon.

Help is available around the clock through a toll-free problem gambling hotline -- the number of which is posted around casinos and on VLTs.

Those who need more a more intensive intervention are referred to the Walter A "Slim" Thorpe treatment centre in Lloydminster, which has a 17-bed problem gambling residential program, Kilarski said.

Needing to stay at a treatment centre is rare, he said -- just two people were referred there last year.

"Our focus right now is providing a range of outpatient treatment services close to home," Kilarski said.

Gamblers Anonymous groups are another support available in numerous locations across the province, he said.

Some say there's more the government and casinos could do to stop compulsive gambling.

John said he'd like to see casinos have professional gambling counsellors on site. Casino staff could check in with players who have spent a significant amount -- \$500 or more -- before they're allowed to continue gambling.

Sociologist Dickinson said the government could adopt a better balance between the revenue it gets from gaming and the amount it spends on problems. In 2005-06, the province raked in \$69.4 million from casinos alone. \$4 million of that money, or less than six per cent, went to treatment and prevention of compulsive gambling, according to the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority.

Recovering compulsive gambler Gerry said he doesn't blame casinos or VLTs for his problems.

"Those people who say casinos are going to take us all to the eternal bonfire are so full of shit they're coming out sideways," he said. "It's just not true."

Pouring money into the government's revenue-generating gaming industry is a choice, he said.

"(There are) all kinds of temptations in society," he said. "If I choose to go in, the fault is mine."

THE STATISTICS ON PROBLEM GAMBLING

A profile of gamblers in Saskatchewan:

- Men are more likely to be risky or problem gamblers than women
- People aged 19-24 are more at risk for being problem gamblers than any other age bracket
- People in common-law relationships are more often at risk for problem gaming than those who are single, married or divorced. Widowed people are least likely to have a gambling problem
- Less educated people are more likely to have a gambling problem than people with more schooling
- The higher your household income, the less likely you are to have a gambling problem
- Aboriginals are 10 times more likely to have a gambling problem than the general population

- The unemployed are at a higher risk of problem gambling than students or people who work part- or full-time
- Problem gamblers' most popular games of choice include lottery tickets, instant win or scratch tickets, VLTs in a bar or lounge, slot machines in a casino and raffle tickets
- Gamblers in Saskatchewan: 86.6 per cent
- Non-gamblers in Saskatchewan: 13.4 per cent
- Gamblers in Saskatchewan by risk
- Non-problem gamblers: 71.4 per cent
- Low-risk gamblers: 9.3 per cent
- Moderate risk gamblers: 4.7 per cent
- Problem gamblers 1.2 per cent