

Gambling: governments' dangerous addiction

Suicide's high toll on gamblers. Provinces playing a losing game

By Samuel Jarjour

National Review of Medicine

May 15, 2007.

NOVA SCOTIA – Two years ago, Garnet Rhyno, a young husband and father from Bedford, NS, took his own life after struggling with an all-consuming addiction to video lottery terminals (VLTs). "Like many others with VLT addictions, his started with innocently dropping some quarters in a corner store machine, not realizing it would take his life," said his wife Sherry, who is now campaigning with other families blighted by the machines to have them banned.

Mr Rhyno's death shines a glaring spotlight on the dark side of gambling. In his singular, final act, the link between gambling and suicide seems undeniable. He even left a suicide note for his wife in which she says he made it clear he was ending it all because of his addiction. Yet, she says no one investigating his death made the connection between his suicide and gambling.

Many experts think these suicides are slipping under the radar right across the country. Some even say the provincial governments, hooked on gambling revenues, prefer it that way.

It wasn't meant to be like this. At a meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference of Chief Coroners and Chief Medical Examiners in June 2003, an agreement was made that all provinces would begin tracking suicides caused by gambling. Most provinces complied, but in BC and PEI tracking of gambling deaths by the coroners' offices is still not standard protocol. Nova Scotia began tracking but stopped in 2004. According to Jeff Dolan, assistant deputy chief coroner for BC, the coroner's office considers the involvement of gambling an important factor for consideration in a death from suicide. "It's important to identify stressors in a person's life. In some cases, gambling has been identified as one, along with other issues. It's very rare that there's just one stressor involved in a suicide." PEI Chief Coroner Dr Charles Trainor agrees, saying his office often considers gambling as a cause in a suicide investigation, but it's not a hard and fast rule they follow.

Indeed, pathological gamblers often cultivate more than one vice. Data from the 2006 Canadian Community Health Survey show that 2% of Canadians are moderate/high-severity problem gamblers. Additionally, comorbidity with other problems is common, such as mood and anxiety disorders, or alcoholism. However, Jack Smith, of the Canada Safety Council (CSC), points out that suicides are more common in pathological gamblers than they are in other addictions.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Given this added degree of gravity of pathological gambling, whose DSM IV diagnostic criteria closely resemble those for alcohol and drug dependence — including signs of cravings, tolerance and withdrawal — the concern of some for the gambling factor in suicide cases comes as no surprise. "There are over 200 gambling-related suicides per year in Canada and this is, if anything, an underestimation," says Mr Smith. "Don't forget that for every suicide there may be five other people turning up in the emergency room with self-inflicted injuries."

According to Mr Dolan, five BC suicide cases have been confirmed as gambling-related since 2004. He insists his office takes the issue seriously. "We're not specifically tracking gambling, but are currently developing a new protocol to have a more standardized approach to investigating suicide in general." He doesn't expect gambling-related suicide numbers to increase with the new investigation protocol, but says better record-keeping, including details on the type of gambling involved, should follow.

BROADER IMPACT

As with other addictions, problem gambling brings on social turmoil, poverty, physical neglect and poor eating. An article published in the April 21 BMJ stresses that governments need to better assess the implications of any increases in gambling accessibility.

Dr Christiane Poulin, MD, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Population Health and Addictions, couldn't agree more. In a recent CMAJ article she highlights the disproportionate representation of problem gambling in already-disadvantaged groups.

Many are quick to point out the conflicted position of provincial governments, which both regulate and profit from the 'gaming' industry. The nation-wide profits from these so-called "voluntary taxes" are \$12 billion annually, according to StatsCan. Sol Boxenbaum, CEO of a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting problem gamblers, suggests that governments might not want to know everything about the impact of gambling on suicide and health.

"We need a much stronger social commitment to gambling addiction, but we don't have the data," says Mr Smith. "What we're trying to do at the CSC is promote a culture of responsibility."

MIXED MESSAGES?

This isn't to say that nothing has been done. The provinces dip into their gambling profits to fund addiction awareness campaigns and counselling programs (you might catch the TV spots running alongside ads for the newest scratch cards). Ontario has even put an addiction treatment kiosk in at least one of its casinos, and Alberta has a similar pilot project in two of its casinos.

But Dr Poulin says these campaigns are wrong-footed. "They place the onus of self-control on the shoulders of the very individuals who have a serious disorder of impulse control," she writes in the CMAJ. She'd prefer to see shifts in public policy, specifically strict restrictions on VLTs and a moratorium on new casinos.

These policy shifts can make a difference, argues Dr Poulin. She cites the 30% reduction of VLTs in Nova Scotia in 2005 as an example. While the province lost \$15 million in VLT profits — a decrease of 11.4%, Dr Poulin says the effort's been successful and cost-effective, noting that policies don't have to be continually funded like ongoing campaigns.

Newfoundland is currently rolling out a similar plan, which includes a more modest 15% reduction of VLTs over five years. They'll also slow down the play and flashing lights on the terminals, which are thought to contribute to VLTs' reputation as the "crack cocaine" of gambling. Gary Parsons, a St John's gambling addiction counsellor, says about 90% of his clients are hooked on VLTs. He adds that he's heard anecdotally of at least 15 VLT-related suicides in Newfoundland in the past year. "The other problem for gamblers is, if you're trying to get away from the machines, there's no place to go," he told the Globe and Mail. "You go to a restaurant, they're there. You go to a dance, they're there. The mall, they're there."