

Submission from Catherine Sommerville re CROWN Royal Commission 22 April 2021

Background

My pokie gambling was caused by dopamine agonist medication prescribed for a neurological condition. The medical profession was unaware that this medication causes compulsive behaviours by changing dopamine pathways in the brain's reward system. Pokie gambling is now a known high risk for those on this medication.

In 2001, I was exposed to pokies through my work as a social planner in local government. The machines mesmerised me from the beginning, which is their purpose. All my accessible financial resources went on the machines. I became confused and fearful about the changes in my thinking and behaviour. My life quietly spiralled out of control and memories of that time are still painful. Years later, I realised that I began to disassociate from my actions to survive. As a professional working in the gambling policy field, my fear and shame were profound.

I gambled this way for almost seven years, losing hundreds of thousands of dollars, two jobs that I valued and relationships with my family of birth, friends and a partner. My gambling only ceased when I discovered the link between it and the dopamine agonist medication in late 2006. Even so, it took a year to reverse the behavioural patterns that had developed.

There is such stigma attached to pokie gambling. People become addicted through no fault of their own, despite Government and community beliefs and propagation of the 'responsible gambling' paradigm. Nobody sets out to become a pokie addict. The machines are designed to addict, and I know that the Royal Commission will receive adequate documentation of this fact. Before the awful coincidence of my dopamine agonist medication and a new position as social planner at a local government which exposed me to pokie machines, I had never gambled apart from an occasional lottery ticket.

I gambled at Crown early in my gambling years. I remember going to professional meetings at Crown and stopping by the pokie rooms on my way home. The sight of so many pokie machines and the sheer anonymity of the place gives legitimacy to the practice of pokie gambling. I remember the casino now as a cold and empty place with pervading sense of erratic activity, flashing lights, hypnotic electronic sounds and quiet despair. I remember few people engaging with anything than the machines. I also have indelible memories of the awful smell of alcohol mixed with other odours of human angst, desperation and yearning.

Ultimately I chose to gamble mainly in suburban pokie venues because they were more accessible and safer for an older woman. However, the fortunes of Crown Casino are inextricably linked with the suburban pokie machine scenario in Victoria. The deal between Crown and the Liberal Party in 2014, supported by the Labor Party, essentially meant that few effective harm minimisation measures in any pokie venues would be made in this state.¹

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/oct/14/crown-casino-given-200m-taxpayer-guarantee-in-extraordinary-deal>

The social costs of gambling

Victoria reaps \$2.7 billion pa in tax revenue from pokie machines yet a study in 2017² identified the following social costs to the state based on 2014 losses.

- \$2.2 billion – family and relationship problems
- \$1.6 billion – emotional and psychological issues, including distress, depression, suicide and violence.
- \$1.3 billion – financial losses through, for example, excessive spending on gambling, bankruptcy and illegal offshore gambling
- \$1.1 billion – costs to the Victorian government, such as research, regulation, and professional support services, including mental health and homelessness services.
- \$600 million – lost productivity and other work-related costs
- \$100 million – costs of crime, including to businesses and the justice system.

From my own experience in health and gambling policy, and through establishing a community education project funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, I have had many stories of gambling harm from pokie gamblers and affected others. The harm is immense yet glossed over by all sides of politics and an often disinterested and judgemental community.

I will never recover from the harm that I experienced. Not only were there material losses but significant mental and physical harms. I know many others in a similar position, and I know several people who suicided because of the despair they experienced.

What changes would be helpful?

- The institution of a gamblers registration system based on legitimate identification. Such a scheme would mean that each registered gambler could only gamble with their own card. It would enable education about risks, the capacity to budget and receive statements of expenditure, and the capacity to self-exclude. Such a scheme would also enable the quick identification of money laundering issues.
- A plan to eliminate pokies from suburban clubs and pubs so that Victoria ultimately has destination pokie gambling at the casino. This plan could include the reduction of opening hours in suburban venues, the non-replacement of redundant or expired machines, no increase in new venues or machine increases in existing venues, and assistance for clubs and hotels to develop alternative non-gambling business models.

² Browne, M, Greer, N, Armstrong, T, Doran, C, Kinchin, I, Langham, E & Rockloff, M 2017, *The social cost of gambling to Victoria*, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Melbourne.

If Victoria must have pokie gambling, let it be at the casino alone but with a gambler licensing or registration system which allows more thoughtful consideration of the need to gamble, and the risks involved.

The Victorian Government, with bipartisan support, has extended existing pokie gambling contacts until 2042. It should be possible to work out a plan for the above or other improvements to be instituted during that time.

Thank you for allowing ordinary people to have a say in this Royal Commission. I would be happy to speak further to any point I have made today.

Yours sincerely

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