

Journal of Child Health Care

<http://chc.sagepub.com/>

Message from Australia to UK: Think about what you are really gambling with

Philip Darbyshire

J Child Health Care 2005 9: 5

DOI: 10.1177/1367493505050508

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://chc.sagepub.com/content/9/1/5>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Association of British Paediatric Nurses

Additional services and information for *Journal of Child Health Care* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://chc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://chc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>



Message from Australia to UK: Think about what you are really gambling with

PHILIP DARBYSHIRE

*Professor and Chair of Nursing, Department of Nursing & Midwifery Research and Practice
Development, Women's & Children's Hospital, North Adelaide, Australia*

Keywords child • health • gambling

On a visit back to the UK last year I could scarcely believe what I was hearing when people told me about government 'deregulation' plans for allowing the gaming industry to unleash even more misery by 'liberalizing' gambling legislation. I live in Australia, which is fast becoming the world leader in problem gambling and where the remorseless spread of 'easy access gambling' and especially electronic gaming machines ('pokies' to us, 'puggies', 'bandits', 'fruit machines', etc., to you) has been a social Chernobyl.

Try to comprehend some of these figures: in 2002–2003 Australians lost \$15 billion or \$1,017 per adult or 3.4 per cent of their disposable income in gambling, with most of this being swallowed up by pokies (Darby, 2003). In South Australia with a population of approximately 1.4 million people, our losses on *pokies alone* has soared from \$187 million in 1994–95 to a staggering \$723 million in 2003–04 (<http://www.xen.net.au/Pokie%20Losses%2094-04.htm>).

Pokies are the crack cocaine of the gambling world. Their addictive potential far exceeds any other form of gambling and this is not accidental. They are designed with only one purpose in mind, to entice people to sit in front of them and fill them with money for as long as possible, and in this they are frighteningly successful. Every aspect of the design of these Pavlovian 'steel traps for dumb animals' is calculated and deliberate, from the sound and light show, to the illusory 'skill features' to the gamble options, to the metal alloy used in the tray that makes a \$5 coin drop sound like \$500 – everything is there to make you 'stay longer and play longer'. Installed in the 'welcoming' social context of the 'pokies lounges' that are now part of almost every Australian pub and club, where the ambience targets women through soft lighting, pastel shades, cheap meals,

loyalty club rewards, 'free tea and coffee' (the most expensive you will ever drink), from your new 'friends' – the lounge staff – and you can see why pokies have feminised problem gambling (Brown and Coventry, 1997; Volberg, 2003). As the Productivity Commission report into gambling in Australia noted:

Changing patterns in problem gambling – particularly the much greater representation by women suffering from problems controlling their use of gaming machines – are particularly strong evidence of a link between accessibility and overall problem gambling rates. (Productivity Commission, 1999, sect. 8.1).

The carnage wrought on communities, particularly the poor and vulnerable, by pokie machines is bad enough but as child health nurses we need to be crystal clear that the spread of these gaming machines poses a specific major threat to children's health and wellbeing. The numbers are not insignificant. As Australia has approximately 300,000 problem gamblers, this suggests that there could be over 174,000 Australian children living within a problem gambling family (Darbyshire, Oster and Carrig, 2001). Children who grow up in a 'problem gambling family' are up to six times more likely to develop a gambling problem themselves and can develop a wide range of psychosocial and behavioural difficulties (Jacobs, et al., 1989; Lesieur and Rothchild, 1989).

In the last 10 years of conducting studies with children and young people across a wide range of their health and illness related issues, I have never seen such profound existential sadness and hopelessness as was apparent in the children we interviewed whose parent (usually mum) had changed from a 'normal' loving, attentive, trustworthy person to someone that the children could barely recognize (Darbyshire, Oster and Carrig, 2001). As one child noted: 'She just wasn't my mum that I knew'. These children described how their lives had disintegrated because of their parent's gambling. They lost their families because either their parents' relationship was ending or because extended family avoided them. They lost schooling by staying at home to be 'company' for their parent in the hope that they might not go out to the hotel to play the pokies if they were there. They lost out materially as there was rarely enough money available at home for sufficient food, clothing, Christmas gifts, and so on. They lost trust in their parent as they believed that their promises to change or to stop gambling were worthless. For one young person this trust was shaken to the core when his mum offered to 'look after' his bank card. He was saving to fund his final high school year school trip to the USA. Needless to say, this too went into the pokies. They lost any sense of hope that their situation would improve and could see no future where their parent was not gambling. Worst of all, perhaps, was that they seemed to lose their sense that their parent loved them. It is hard for a 13 year old who tries to talk to her mum about gambling to be told, 'I don't give a stuff, this is my life not your life'. Children were angry and confused about what had happened to their mums: 'When she went to the pokies, all she's become is a selfish person, only thinks about herself. She didn't care about us at all'. These

children's lives were summed up in stark poignancy by one participant in our study who explained that: 'Everything that we had, it's just all gone. Simple'.

It has been said that problem gambling isn't a problem, problem *losing* is a problem. If gambling in the UK is made more accessible and, in particular, if gaming machines become more widespread, children will count themselves among gambling's many other losers. It is unconscionable that children should be expected to pay the price of adult greed. Governments, Local Authorities and the leisure/gaming industries see the prospect of money-for-nothing and become as addicted to gambling revenue as do the hapless punters. In Australia we are struggling to turn back the pokies tide but when this particular Pandora's Box is opened, it is incredibly hard to close again. Gambling is absolutely a child health and child protection issue. As child health nurses you can help protect children and communities by getting involved in any campaign to stop the spread of more accessible and widespread gambling. It is families and children's lives that we are really gambling with.

References

- Brown, S. and Coventry, L. (1997). *Queen of Hearts: The needs of women with gambling problems*. Melbourne: Financial and Consumer Rights Council (Inc).
- Darby, A. (2003). 'Betting losses top \$15 billion', *The Age*. Melbourne. 24 September, p. 1.
- Darbyshire, P.(2001). 'The Experience of Pervasive Loss: Children and Young People Living in a Family Where Parental Gambling is a Problem', *Journal of Gambling Studies* 17(1): 23–45.
- Darbyshire, P., Oster, C. and Carrig, H. (2001). 'Children of parent(s) who have a gambling problem: A review of the literature and commentary on research approaches', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 9(4): 185–93.
- Jacobs, D., F. Marston, A.R., Singer, R. D., Widaman, K., Little, T. and Veizades, J. (1989) 'Children of problem gamblers', *Journal of Gambling Behaviour* 5(4): 261–8.
- Lesieur, H. and Rothchild, J. (1989) 'Children of Gamblers Anonymous members', *Journal of Gambling Behaviour* 5(4): 269–78.
- Productivity Commission (1999) *Australia's Gambling Industrie*. Volumes I-III and Overview. Canberra: AusInfo.
www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/gambling/finalreport/index.html
- Volberg, R. (2003) 'Has there been a "feminization" of gambling and problem gambling in the United States?' *eGambling: The Electronic Journal of Gambling Issues* 8: 1–30. <http://www.camh.net/egambling/issue8/feature/index.html>