

## Gambling: The debate we should be having

Posted on Thursday 17th February 2011

Britain now has one of the largest and most diverse gambling markets in the world. Gross takings after paying out winnings are in the region of £10bn annually. I argue in my book, 'An Unsafe Bet?', that gambling has been allowed to expand without proper public consultation and debate. Constraints on commercial gambling provision were progressively eased in the 1980s and 90s, culminating in the liberalising Gambling Act of 2005. Intense lobbying for de-restriction on the part of gambling operators was an important element, but lack of consideration of the dangerous, addictive nature of gambling products also played a part.

Understanding of addiction has advanced considerably since the days when heroin addiction was the prototype and gambling, at best, was considered only marginal. Partly due to a recognition of the wide variety of drugs that can be associated with addiction, and much assisted by developments in cognitive psychology and neuroscience, modern addiction theory now embraces gambling as a fully legitimate member. Indeed some have even suggested that gambling is a more central, 'pure' addiction, uncomplicated by the side effects of drugs.

The results of the latest British Gambling Prevalence Survey (BGPS), carried out in late 2009 and early 2010 by the National Centre for Social Research, for the Gambling Commission, have just been published. They show, as many had predicted, a significant increase in the prevalence of problem gambling since the last survey was carried out in 2006/07, just before the 2005 Act came fully into operation. Estimated prevalence has risen from 0.6% of the adult population to 0.9% which equates to about 450,000 adults, aged 16 and over. The survey report also suggests that, in addition, around twice that number are gambling to an extent that puts them at 'moderate risk'. Other surveys in the UK and elsewhere clearly show that teenagers, many too young to be included in adult surveys, are even more susceptible to gambling addiction than adults. All the evidence then suggests that problem gambling constitutes a significant public health problem, of similar magnitude in fact to that of illicit drug misuse.

Government, I believe, has now become complicit in gambling expansion. It wears a number of hats which don't match. It benefits financially from taxing commercial gambling operations and even operates gambling itself in the form of the National Lottery. At the same time it is responsible not only for regulating gambling but also for promoting public health and protecting citizens from danger. The coalition Government should heed the warning signs and switch from New Labour's laissez-faire position on gambling expansion to one based upon the precautionary principle. The ground should at least be held against further expansion. The Department of Health should begin to play a lead role in the recognition of the public health aspects of gambling: significantly it is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport which leads at the moment, having taken over from the Home Office a few years ago.

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His latest book, 'An Unsafe Bet? The Dangerous Rise of Gambling and the Debate We Should Be Having', was published by Wiley-Blackwell in January this year.

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