

Conference 2003: Prevention of problem gambling

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Together with the School of Health Sciences, the Alberta Gaming Research Institute sponsored the 'Prevention of Problem Gambling' conference on March 27-28, 2003. It took place at the University of Lethbridge and was of interest to researchers, clinicians, counsellors, educators, representatives from government and industry, and the general public. Leading Albertan, Canadian and international gambling researchers presented their research findings. Additionally, there were presentations on the development of specific prevention initiatives and programs. For further information, see presentation materials on Institute website (URL: http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/Events/2003_Conference).

OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Nady el-Guebaly (*University of Calgary*),
Ms. Sheila Murphy (*Council Chair & Board Member*),
& **Ms. Pat Wall** (*Dean of Health Science, University of Lethbridge*)

In his opening address to conference attendees, Dr. Nady el-Guebaly provided an introduction and description of the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. He identified several challenges facing gambling researchers and acknowledged the benefits of partnership between academia and government. Sheila Murphy then introduced the Institute's corporate video to the audience for its premiere viewing. Pat Wall, Dean of Health Science at the University of Lethbridge, officially welcomed attendees to the University and the City of Lethbridge.

Ms. Elizabeth George (*North American Training Institute*)

Ms. Elizabeth George began by providing a number of informative highlights from gambling's long history. For instance, the Great Wall of China was built using Keno profits, the Roman Emperor Nero was a dedicated gambler, and that lotteries helped pay for the construction of Harvard and Yale universities.

Gambling has emerged as a very popular activity for some in society and this popularity has not gone unnoticed by youth. Some kids gamble for fun, freedom, or to increase their status among peers. Others turn to gambling as an escape from their problems or a way to "anesthetize" themselves from pain they are feeling. Telltale signs of youth gambling can include shoplifting, lowered interest in favourite activities, evasiveness, or a behavioural change. George reminded attendees that underage gambling has only recently become a recognized problem among youth. She hopes that by building awareness of this issue, more effective prevention and educational programs will be developed.

Mr. Robert Murray (*Centre for Addiction and Mental Health*)

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) is a lead organization for the training of treatment professionals in Ontario. Mr. Murray provided a description and overview of his organization's gambling prevention initiatives, which are funded using a percentage (2%) of the province's gambling revenues. Murray explained that there are an estimated 340,000 problematic gamblers in the province but only about 1,000 people are treated every year.

In order to better assist people experiencing gambling problems, a new gambling-neutral, evidence-based awareness initiative has been developed which is called the "Promoting Community Awareness of Problem Gambling Resource Package". Murray explained that the tool could be tailored for use by clinicians to deliver effective and engaging presentations to a variety of people. This impressive and comprehensive resource has been received with much enthusiasm among treatment personnel in Ontario.

Ms. Leanne Fischer (*Saskatchewan Health*)

Ms. Leanne Fischer provided an informative description of Saskatchewan's problem gambling initiatives for both youth and adults. In discussing prevention initiatives for youth in the province, Fischer described that Saskatchewan Health used feedback from youth and incorporated it into the development of posters and other activities. She displayed examples of imaginative promotional items such as water

bottles, tattoos, and key chains. Displays at the Provincial Science Centre were also developed which were intended to be fun learning activities that explain the math behind gambling.

Adults in the province identified as being at moderate risk for gambling problems have been targeted by a media campaign. Focus-group testing of radio and billboard advertisements were used to select the most effective prevention messages. The advertisements were placed a number of non-traditional locales — e.g. in second-run movie theatres, bars, university districts, and on “table-tops” at VLT establishments.

Dr. Richard LaBrie (*Division on Addictions, Harvard Medical School*)

Dr. LaBrie engaged conference attendees with an interesting presentation that focused on the “Facing the Odds” curriculum being used in Louisiana. The program has been designed to pique the interest of youth in science and includes a significant module on probability and risk-taking. He says that by presenting this material in an entertaining way, youth tend to better understand the risks associated with their gambling behaviour. They are also more inclined to view mathematics as fun and relevant in their lives.

LaBrie also cautioned prevention professionals that there will always be “nay-sayers” who are critical of certain programs due to moral issues. He noted that gambling is a complex matter but as more research findings become available, the better we are able to prevent problems in youth.

Dr. Gary Roberts (*Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse*)

Dr. Roberts is an expert in the field of substance abuse and prevention initiatives. He has been instrumental in the creation of a compendium of educational measures that covers a broad spectrum of prevention possibilities. He firmly believes that the prevention initiatives that have the greatest impact are, unfortunately, those that are least popular. These tend to be policy-type proposals that would include reducing the availability of alcohol or increasing taxation on tobacco products.

When it comes to the prevention of gambling among young people, Roberts points out that the best approach might be a combination of abstinence and “harm minimization” depending on their individual situations. He cautions that such interventions need to happen regularly and as part of a process since it is very difficult to change behaviours.

Ms. Nadine Nowatzki (*University of Lethbridge*)

In her presentation, Ms. Nowatzki described casino self-exclusion programs and how they have been implemented in various jurisdictions. Self-exclusion

programs are considered a “tertiary” intervention — i.e., for people who are already experiencing a problem with gambling. The limited data available suggests that such a “public proclamation” can be an effective prevention tool for about 30% of self-excluders but enforcement tends to be problematic. To improve the effectiveness of self-exclusion, Nowatzki proposed a number of recommendations that would strengthen the programs.

Nowatzki’s presentation generated a lively and thoughtful debate among conference attendees on the merits of such initiatives. Ultimately, she noted that self-exclusion is only one part of the prevention solution and that further research is needed.

Dr. Nady el-Guebaly (*University of Calgary*)

In his presentation, Dr. el-Guebaly pointed out that the “harm reduction” philosophy of prevention is presently in vogue among Canadian professionals. Interestingly, alcohol and tobacco use in Canada show marked differences in consumption patterns over the past decade. For those attempting to understand these differences, el-Guebaly says that it is important to also consider the broader cultural determinants.

In order to study these other factors that influence gambling behaviour, the Alberta Gaming Research Institute is proposing to undertake a significant “accelerated longitudinal” study. The study will effectively function as “a living lab” and will follow several age cohorts for five years in order to monitor their gambling behaviours. Dr. el-Guebaly explained the advantages of using longitudinal design and outlined the choices that his team had to consider when putting together a study with such a broad scope.

Mr. Tom Walker (*Ontario YMCA*)

Mr. Tom Walker provided a description of the Ontario YMCA gambling prevention project and discussed its origins. The three-year old program has been so successful that it is now being introduced to 18 additional YMCA sites across Ontario. The program targets young people (and their parents) between the ages of 8 and 24 years of age. Development of the initiative was grounded in research and intended to be “youth friendly”. In addition, language used in the presentations was chosen to be “non-blaming”.

Walker highlighted his presentation with a polished multi-media demonstration of the initiative, and showed examples of the sessions delivered to different age cohorts. He said that the presentation often leads to discussion amongst peers about gambling. According to Walker, this concept of engaging youth is key to the effectiveness of gambling prevention initiatives.

Mr. Ken Surovy (*Addictions Foundation of Manitoba*)

In his presentation, Mr. Ken Surovy first detailed the history of gambling in Manitoba before shifting his focus to the province's youth gambling strategy. The original program was conceived in 1994 but has been continually refined and improved since that time. Surovy also described the "Keeping Your Shirt On", "Deal Me In", and "Just Ask" programs — three of Manitoba's well-known prevention initiatives.

The primary goals of these prevention initiatives are to reduce future harm and to inform youth about sources for health information in an engaging manner. In order to empirically test the effectiveness of the programs, the department carefully monitored outcomes. A scientific evaluation of "Keeping Your Shirt On" found that the experimental group increased their gambling knowledge by 14%. These types of results have proved encouraging and the program is now delivering prevention messages to a growing number of high school students across Manitoba.

Ms. Z'Anne Harvey-Jansen, Ms. Theresa Hermary, & Mr. Ron Beach (*Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission*)

This presentation highlighted the three primary services of the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) — treatment, prevention, and the provision of information. Ms. Z'Anne Harvey-Jansen described the organization's problem gambling prevention resources and explained how programs like "Playing for Keeps" are delivered to different youth age groups.

Ms. Theresa Hermary then discussed how AADAC's prevention strategy is attempting to reduce the problem by targeting gambling risk factors amongst youth. Novel community projects (e.g. poetry contest) have been developed and delivered in conjunction with partner groups as a way to help make youth aware of the risks associated with gambling.

The third presenter, Mr. Ron Beach, talked about AADAC's "indicated prevention" programs. These programs are intended for those who are already experiencing a gambling problem. Examples included the "Winning Moments" video and presentation for VLT retailers and the "Gambling Decisions" workbook that was developed in collaboration with various Edmonton partner groups.

Mr. Barry Pritchard (*ABS Casinos*)

Mr. Barry Prichard both enlightened and entertained conference attendees with his unique "industry insider" perspective on problem gambling prevention initiatives. He explained that there were numerous

unofficial "prevention-type" initiatives in the early days of Alberta casino gambling. They included not allowing gambling using credit, strict enforcement of age limits, and local self-exclusion policies.

Pritchard also discussed his take on the industry's future and noted that it will be very challenging. He made reference to I. Nelson Rose's theory of gambling cycles and opined that Alberta is approximately 10 years into a 40-year cycle of gambling expansion. In his view, children and seniors are two groups that will figure prominently in this continued gambling expansion and should be given special consideration with respect to prevention initiatives.

Dr. Dennis Connolly & Dr. Robert Williams (*University of Lethbridge*)

Professors Connolly and Williams provided analysis on the effectiveness of two gambling prevention and awareness programs involving young people.

The first project involved teaching undergraduate university students statistical concepts through the use gambling examples. Interestingly, there had been few other investigations of targeted prevention among these age groups. Results of the study indicated that, though students became more aware of the odds involved in gambling, they were not likely to alter the amount of money spent gambling or the time they devoted to this activity.

The second project focused on a high school class who were participated in an interactive 5-session classroom program that discussed the issue of gambling. After exposure to the course, testing of the students revealed that they had changed attitudes, increased knowledge, and fewer cognitive errors with respect to gambling. There was, however, little change in gambling frequency or time spent gambling.

Ms. Tracy Schrans (*Focal Research Consultants, Inc. – Nova Scotia*)

Nova Scotia was the first jurisdiction in North America to introduce Responsible Gaming Features (RGFs) to video lottery terminals (VLTs). The features included the introduction of a clock, a display of cash remaining rather than credits, a "pop-up" reminder of time spent playing, and a mandatory cash-out after playing for 150 minutes.

Tracy Schrans was part of a research team that investigated the effectiveness of these features. She stated that profits per machine actually went up after the introduction of RGFs but that the features do have an impact on reducing problem play. According to Schrans, the most effective of the measures was the "pop-up" reminder of how long a player has

on an individual machine. Studies such as these will be of critical importance to other jurisdictions that are considering implementation of similar machine-based responsible gambling features.

Dr. Jeff Derevensky (*International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviours, McGill University*)

Dr. Jeff Derevensky of the McGill International Centre for Youth Gambling is concerned about the transfer of gambling knowledge between and amongst generations. He notes that gambling prevalence rates for adolescents are generally 2-4 times that of adults.

His research suggests that youth gambling behaviour often starts earlier than involvement with either drugs or alcohol. Youth experiencing problems with gambling also tend to suffer from low self-esteem and depression. In order to prevent these types of problems from occurring, Derevensky would like to see a "mental health curriculum" that would educate youth about all types of risky behaviour. He would also like to see more socially responsible gambling advertising that does not glamourize the activity.

Dr. Colin Mangham (*Prevention Source, British Columbia*)

In his presentation, Dr. Mangham delivered the important message that behavioural change begins with action, and that the process usually takes time. He wholly recommends prevention initiatives because it is invariably more difficult to deal with issues like problem gambling after the fact.

Mangham also stressed to treatment professionals that they be "consistent in their message" and not to "slacken" over time. He predicts that the momentum built up from the growing public interest in problem gambling prevention will eventually lead to widespread behavioural change. With vigilance and a desire to effect change, professionals can make a significant contribution to the health of those populations vulnerable to addiction.

Dr. Garry Smith (*University of Alberta*)

Dr. Garry Smith raised several thought-provoking questions in his conference wrap-up and closing remarks. Specifically, he suggested that that "responsible gambling" and "gambling neutral" strategies were not necessarily the best ways prevent gambling problems. Additionally, he explained that the most effective gambling prevention comes about as a result of change in government policy. In conclusion, he challenged conference attendees to make their voices heard with respect to gambling policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

CONFERENCE PRESENTERS

Each of the conference presenters made a very valuable contribution of their time and expertise in addressing the topic of 'Prevention of Problem Gambling'. In addition to their willingness to make themselves available for the conference, many have provided copies of their presentations and/or related publications for posting on the Alberta Gaming Research Institute website — for more information, see <http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/Events/2003_Conference/> or contact Mr. Rhys Stevens at rhys.stevens@uleth.ca or phone (403) 329-5176.

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Thank you very much!