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GIVING THE GAMBLERS A VOICE: THE PERCEIVED EFFICACY OF RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING PRACTICES IN NSW CLUBS

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Abstract:

This paper analyses qualitative data gathered from 339 patrons of ten NSW clubs via a survey assessing their perceived efficacy of venue-based responsible gambling measures. Analysis of over 25,000 words of 'additional comments' from these patrons yielded 541 comments, subsequently grouped into 17 themes and 56 sub-themes. Each is summarised, drawing heavily on the respondents' verbatim comments to convey the sentiments and emotions expressed. As such, this paper gives a voice to one important, but often overlooked, stakeholder group in the gambling debate – the gamblers themselves. Most respondents were critical of governments and gambling venues in their focus on gambling, of some ineffective responsible gambling measures, of venue enticements to gamble, and of many aspects of poker machine design. While considerable concern about problem gambling was expressed, a sizeable minority felt that responsible gambling starts with the individual. However, most respondents considered that much more could be done by gambling venues and governments to encourage responsible gambling.

Key words: responsible gaming, gaming venues, problem gambling

Introduction

The *Gambling Legislation Amendment (Responsible Gambling) Act 1999 NSW* established in a legislative framework certain obligations of gambling operators in New South Wales (NSW) Australia in responsible management of gambling. Specific requirements for registered clubs were detailed in the *Registered Clubs Amendment (Responsible Gambling) Act 2000 NSW* and associated Regulations and operationalised principally through the ClubSafe program developed by the NSW club industry association, Clubs NSW. Following enactment of this legislation and the implementation of ClubSafe, a research project was funded by the NSW Casino Community Benefit Fund to assess club members' awareness, perceived adequacy and perceived effectiveness of responsible gambling strategies in Sydney clubs (Hing, 2003). While the quantitative findings of this study have been published previously (Hing, 2004), its qualitative findings have not, except to add some detail and depth to the quantitative results reported. Yet, these qualitative data tell a story on their own and shed particular light on whether club patrons consider that the gambling environment in clubs does, in fact, minimise harm and meet community expectations, as the ClubSafe program explicitly aims to do (Clubs NSW, 2000).

What emerges from this analysis is that the club patrons surveyed have considerable interest in and concern about problem gambling and responsible gambling. Consistent with public health models that recognise that gambling problems 'emanate from a multiplicity

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of environmental, social and psychological factors' (e.g. Productivity Commission, 1999), they were able to identify numerous contributors to gambling problems and suggestions for change. From a broader perspective, it is apparent that, for these people, problem gambling is a social issue in Australia that is yet to be resolved, and that its resolution requires substantive action, particularly from gambling venues, governments and poker machine designers.

Methodology

This paper discusses qualitative responses given as additional comments on an otherwise quantitative survey administered to patrons of ten registered clubs in Sydney NSW Australia. The methodology, characteristics of respondents and quantitative results for this study have been explained in detail elsewhere (Hing, 2003, 2004), so only an overview is provided here.

Two surveys were conducted. The sample for the first, a mail survey, comprised the top, middle and bottom 500 people (according to gambling expenditure in the previous 12 months) on the player tracking system of each of four clubs, to include people of varying levels of gambling involvement. The second survey, conducted on-site in another six clubs, used convenience sampling as patrons entered the club. All participating clubs had gaming machines, TAB and keno facilities. The sample included clubs of different types (RSL, workers, leagues, community), with differing membership bases and located in suburbs with varying socio-economic profiles. Thus, while this sample was not representative of the population of NSW clubs, the results should not be overly biased towards clubs with particular characteristics. In reality, the club sample selected was also determined by the willingness of the clubs to participate. The researchers commenced negotiations in August/September 2002, by contacting clubs they had previously engaged in research and those whose managers or gaming managers they knew personally. By October 2002, the management and boards of ten clubs had agreed to participate. However, a change in the data collection protocol became necessary when six of these clubs subsequently declined to participate in the mail out, but allowed on-site surveying instead. Both surveys were completed by mid-2003.

Three-quarters of a page of lined space was left on the questionnaire's back page inviting respondents to 'please use this space if you wish to make any additional comments about responsible gambling'. Of the 706 respondents to the mail survey, 292 people (41.4% of respondents) provided comments, as did 47 (19.0%) of respondents to the on-site surveys. This totalled 339 respondents or 35.5% of the 954 respondents overall. To analyse these data, all comments were entered into a word processing program and totalled over 25,000 words. The researcher then read through all comments and identified themes within which they could be coded. The data were then coded into these themes by grouping relevant comments under appropriate headings. Sub-themes within these categories were then identified. Separating comments that covered multiple themes and sub-themes resulted in 541 comments in total, covering 17 themes and 56 sub-themes.

Table 1 identifies the themes, sub-themes and number of related comments that emerged. What is immediately apparent is the large diversity of themes and sub-themes, reflecting the complexity and controversy surrounding the issue of responsible gambling. Each of these themes and sub-themes is summarised below, drawing heavily on the respondents' own comments to convey the sentiments and emotions expressed.

Table 1: Themes, Sub-Themes and Number of Related Comments

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>No. of Comments</i>	<i>Sub-Total (%)</i>
Concern For Problem Gambling and Those Affected	General concerns about problem gambling Problem gambling as an addiction Sympathy for problem gamblers Concern for problem gambling's impact on others	10 14 5 6	35 (6.5%)
Personal Experiences Of Gambling Problems	Own experiences with problem gambling Others' experiences with problem gambling	13 11	24 (4.4%)
Individual Responsibility For Problem Gambling	Controlling gambling is individual responsibility Personal strategies to control gambling	42 27	69 (12.8%)
Individual Motivations For Gambling	Fun and entertainment Relaxation Relieves loneliness or boredom Social interaction	17 8 5 3	33 (6.1%)
Government Priorities In Gambling	Criticism of revenue raising priority Criticism of the accessibility of gambling General irresponsibility	12 4 6	22 (4.1%)
Gaming Venue Priorities In Gambling	Criticisms of hotels Criticisms of clubs Criticisms of hotels and clubs Support for responsible gambling initiatives	14 8 4 13	39 (7.2%)
Accessibility To Machines	Reduce poker machine numbers Shorter opening hours	15 18	33 (6.1%)
Responsible Gambling Signage And Information	Consider signage effective Consider signage ineffective Suggested improvements to signage	9 30 13	52 (9.6%)
Physical Environment In Gambling Areas	Improve visibility of clocks Improve lighting, particularly natural lighting Put gambling areas out of view Provide alternatives to gambling Support for non-gambling facilities provided Seating design Ban smoking as a responsible gambling measure	6 7 8 12 4 1 4	42 (7.8%)
Access To Cash	Remove ATMs and EFTPOS from venues ATMs and EFTPOS too close to gambling areas Limit ATM withdrawals Criticisms of current cheque cashing	22 5 11 7 4	49 (9.1%)

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	policies Advocate cash payouts be reduced		
Payouts and Change Procedures	Delays in getting change Delays in getting machine payouts	5 19	24 (4.4%)
Gambling and Alcohol Consumption	Contribution of alcohol to excessive gambling	5	5 (0.9%)
Self-Exclusion	Criticism of current self-exclusion procedures	4	4 (0.7%)
Gaming Venue Promotions	Promotions lead to longer gambling sessions Criticism of promotions as inducements to gamble	9 9	18 (3.3%)
Gambling Venue Staff	Increased intervention by gambling venue staff Staff training in responsible gambling	11 2	13 (2.4%)
Poker Machine Design	Criticisms on the fast rate of play Better information on the odds of winning Criticism of note acceptors Reduce the maximum bet Reduce the number of betting lines Advocate time limits on machines Criticisms of large (linked) jackpots Criticisms of the win rate on machines Advocacy of cashless gaming Need for warnings and information on machines Reduce music and noise of machines	5 11 6 9 4 7 6 16 1 7 2	74 (13.7%)
Support for Counselling	Role of counselling in helping gambling problems	5	5 (0.9%)
Total No. Of Comments		541	100%

General Concern for Problem Gambling

Themes 1 and 2 reflected general concern for problem gambling, as discussed below.

Theme 1: Concern for Problem Gambling and Those Affected

As shown in Table 1, 35 comments reflected concern for problem gamblers and those affected. Ten reflected general concerns about problem gambling in the community and amongst club patrons, with some commenting on its pervasiveness, that ‘it is...easy to see the problem gambler and there are many of them’, that ‘the incidence of dangerously irresponsible gambling is...far greater than the general population realise and the real costs far higher’, that ‘gambling is a very serious problem today’ and that ‘poker machines are a disease worse than smoking or drinking’.

Fourteen people, viewing problem gambling as an addiction, felt that responsible gambling measures would have marginal effect because ‘gambling addictions, like alcohol or drug

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addictions, are personal'. As one expressed, 'it is a terrible addiction. It's everywhere. There is NO responsible gambling for an addict', and another that 'I really don't see how you can educate impulsive, addicted gamblers to practice responsible gambling'. Another took a more personal perspective, that 'I come from a gambling background. It is addictive so choice has to come from the gambler'.

Five people sympathised with problem gamblers, stating 'I feel sorry for anybody who does have a gambling problem...surely they need help' and 'it's a very sad thing'. Six respondents expressed concern about the impacts of gambling problems on others, because 'it is tearing some families apart', 'it destroys families, not just one person', 'children don't deserve this', and it has 'huge social impacts'.

Theme 2: Personal Experiences of Gambling Problems

Twenty-four comments related to personal experiences of gambling problems, grouped into two sub-themes - respondents' own experiences and those of significant others. Thirteen people related personal experiences of gambling problems, citing impacts such as stealing money ('twice in the last two years'); gambling away their 'nest egg'; incurring debt; feeling guilt and self-disappointment ('I feel stupid. I am a responsible, sensible person that lost their mind on the poker machines. One day I will wake up to myself'); low self-esteem ('I've let myself down; worse I've let my wife and children down'); depression ('I'm a depressed and disappointed person'); illness ('I got so ill one night I thought my heart was going to stop'); shortage of money for food; lying to family and friends ('if my children ask I will have to say I have invested'); disruption to employment and family life, and threats to family relationships ('I nearly lost my job and my family').

Others mentioned triggers for their excessive gambling. These included loss of a loved one, loneliness, drinking alcohol and meeting up with friends who gamble. While some blamed lack of self-control, others blamed poker machine promotions, the random nature of machines, major jackpots, and easy access to savings. Three people asked for help. One asked 'tell me a better way to stay in touch with people. Better still help me to stop gambling'. Another pleaded to 'please do something - please, please, please. At the moment I believe gambling stakeholders - government, clubs, casino - only pay lip service. They earn profit from our addiction'. Another simply asked 'for someone to help me not gamble'.

Eleven other people related others' experiences with gambling problems. These included family members, with one relating that 'my uncle used a double mortgage on his house, lost his marriage by stealing and gambling away my aunt's money, became desperate and manipulative and lost the support of all the family'. Another said that her ex-husband's gambling 'caused the marriage break up, it cost me \$30,000 to pay my friends back', and another that a parent's gambling 'caused years of friction and problems for our family'. Others related tales of gambling problems amongst friends, such as one 'who gambles away her pay, is always borrowing money from family and friends, makes all the excuses under the sun'. Others had observed disturbing incidences amongst club patrons, such as one 'who attends Gamblers Anonymous and then goes to the club straight after it's finished', and another who 'once saw a man playing the pokies and his five children and wife were behind a glass wall and looking at their father crying...that upset me a lot'. One respondent was a police officer who had 'seen and been to a great deal of domestics where the problem is gambling-related'. Another explained that, 'as a Lifeline counsellor in 1981,

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I received hardly any calls about gambling problems. By...2000, such calls represented 80%’.

The Individual’s Role in Dealing with Problem Gambling

Two themes raised (Themes 3 and 4) relate to the role of individuals in ensuring they gamble responsibly. That is, gamblers themselves were seen as an important stakeholder in minimising and dealing with gambling problems.

Theme 3: Individual Responsibility for Problem Gambling

Sixty-nine comments related to personal responsibility for problem gambling. Forty-two respondents felt that responsible gambling stemmed from the individual, their own attitude, decisions and self-control. Some comments were that ‘you do know what you are doing and should accept your own problem’, ‘people make their own decisions and are responsible for what they choose’, ‘we all need to be more aware of OUR responsibilities in life and stop blaming others for our problems’, and ‘gambling is an individual concern; everyone should take responsibility for their own actions’. Twelve of these people explicitly stated it should not be an industry or government responsibility, stating ‘responsible gambling is the responsibility of the patron NOT the club’, ‘clubs, pubs and other establishments should not be expected to babysit for adults’, and ‘governments should not have to legislate laws for each and every individual’. One respondent was quite resentful, stating ‘I am sick and tired of...people who are irresponsible and do stupid acts.... It is about time people took responsibility for their own actions and stopped blaming others for their own stupidity and lack of restraint or personal control. We waste too much time and money on these fools’.

Twenty-seven comments related to personal strategies to control gambling. Suggestions, usually drawn from personal experience, included only betting what you can afford to lose; taking limited cash to the venue; quitting after winning a certain amount; setting time limits; setting loss limits; playing only low denomination machines; leaving bank cards at home; instructing the doorman not to let them in again that day; setting a limit on bets per spin; going to the venue infrequently or only at set intervals (e.g. ‘once a fortnight’); only going when they have spare money; only playing with winnings; and buying the week’s groceries and paying all bills before gambling. As well as these ‘practical’ strategies, others noted self-discipline ‘as the only answer’; thinking of what else the money could buy (‘I always ask myself what could you buy with this money?’); thinking of gambling as ‘entertainment ...and not for the purpose of winning money’; and expecting to lose and seeing winning as a bonus.

Theme 4: Individual Motivations for Gambling

Thirty-three respondents commented on individual motivations for gambling and links with problem and responsible gambling. Of these, 17 noted the fun and entertainment aspects of gambling, with one commenting ‘I believe responsible gambling mostly comes from being entertained with respect to losing money. Trying to win or break even presents problems’. Eight people explained they gambled for relaxation, such as one who stated ‘I do see many people around who are serious about their gambling, just as I see people like myself - having a relaxed time - not expecting to become rich - whiling away a few hours’. Five noted that many people gamble for escape and to relieve loneliness and boredom and

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that ‘playing the pokies enables people who are lonely to go somewhere social - without necessarily being social...it is also an opportunity to have some time out from their daily responsibilities’. A further three respondents said they enjoyed the social interaction from gambling – that ‘I go to the club for company. There is always someone to talk to. The gambling is secondary’ and that ‘gambling can be a way of getting people to become friends. And then they won’t play the machines. People need things to enjoy and meet others; this is why people play poker machines’.

The Government’s Role in Dealing with Problem Gambling

A second stakeholder identified as having a role in problem gambling was the government, as reflected in Theme 5.

Theme 5: Government Priorities in Gambling

Twenty-two respondents were highly critical of government policy on gambling, with 12 particularly criticising its reliance on gambling taxes, which prioritised revenue raising over social concerns. One noted ‘only a government can stop this. Ours has vested interest in allowing the problem to continue and indeed grow’ and another that ‘I sincerely feel that the government is doing absolutely nothing about the problem. They rely heavily on the taxes derived’. More bluntly, others commented that ‘state governments are hooked on gambling for revenue ‘ and ‘the government sux (sic). It only wants taxes’. Four respondents commented that this emphasis on revenue-raising has facilitated gambling’s expansion and accessibility, and were critical of the high community exposure to gambling. As one noted, ‘the social problems that gambling creates should not have to be addressed after the damage has been done. It should be done before it happens. This can only happen if governments limit the access to gambling, but they won’t do this because it will cost huge amounts of money’. Others considered the government as largely responsible for exacerbating problem gambling and for doing too little to address it via counselling services and community education. As one explained, ‘gambling...is more accessible than ever before. ...governments willingly pursue the revenue that gambling creates...then put back a tiny percentage in counselling and advertising’. Six respondents commented on the government’s general irresponsibility, that ‘the government, like it always does with mismanagement, just doesn’t seem to know it is the baseline cause’ and ‘there is no such thing as responsible gambling; there should be a responsible government’.

Gaming Venues’ Role in Dealing with Problem Gambling

Ten themes related to gaming venues as stakeholders in problem gambling. Two of these (Themes 6 and 7) conveyed general concerns about gaming venue priorities and the easy access they provide to gambling, while the remainder (Themes 8-15) related to specific practices deterring or promoting responsible gambling.

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Theme 6: Gaming Venue Priorities in Gambling

Thirty-nine comments and four sub-themes emerged within the broad theme of gaming venue priorities. Of these, 14 respondents criticised hotels (that ‘problems have escalated immensely since poker machines have been introduced into hotels’; that ‘it lines the publican’s pocket’ while ‘at least the clubs have some redeeming features by way of donations to various good causes, together with subsidised facilities’); a general lack of control mechanisms in hotels (‘there are no controls at all. At least at my club I can ask the staff to restrict my gambling or even instruct the doorman not to let me back in if I leave’); significant inducements to gamble (‘the hotel areas are the ones that need to be looked at as you will receive free drinks and credits and they are open 24 hours’); and that poker machines had reduced the amenity and social interaction in pubs (‘I used to enjoy a drink and a game of pool at my local hotel but I resent being confronted with poker machines’).

Eight comments criticised clubs. These included that clubs are interested only in profits (‘I don’t think any club cares - they are only interested in making money’); profits are spent largely on club expansion (‘new buildings built, little for the club member [sucker]’); they unduly encourage gambling (‘if the clubs were fair dinkum...they would not increase the size of the gambling machines, would not...increase bonus promotions...would provide other type of entertainment...would not use machines as revenue raising tool’); have little concern for their patrons’ well-being (‘one would be very naive to think that a club has a personal interest in limiting one’s losses’); and they have only introduced responsible gambling measures because ‘it has been made compulsory’.

A further four respondents had similar criticisms for both clubs and hotels, that they are more interested in expansion than patrons’ wellbeing. As one said, ‘I think clubs and pubs are only interested in receiving profit for expansion [rather] than worried about the gambling members’.

However, 13 positive comments were made about clubs, that respondents were generally pleased they have implemented responsible gambling practices, that ‘my club does its best to deter compulsive gambling’ and ‘it’s great that clubs are taking steps to promote responsible gambling’.

Theme 7: Accessibility to Poker Machines

Thirty-three comments related to poker machine accessibility in venues. Of these, ten advocated ‘dramatically’ reduced machine numbers such that ‘all clubs should be made to downsize the number of poker machines’, while five wanted them ‘banned altogether’ (‘yuk! Get rid of it all). A further 18 advocated shorter opening hours. Some favoured shutting down venues ‘for a few hours each day’ or their gambling facilities at certain intervals to ‘give a chance to the average gambler to gather their thoughts and bearings and perhaps think twice about becoming problem gamblers. Let’s face it, the more hours the clubs are open, the more chances there are of gambling’. Others saw shorter opening hours as a way to reduce gambling expenditure and therefore financial problems (‘people I have spoken to say they spent a lot less when the club closed at or before midnight’ and ‘nobody can afford to gamble, especially when the opportunity is given 24 hours a day’). It would also encourage gamblers to spend more time on other responsibilities, to ‘give patrons time to rest, shop, deal with home matters and family, see to children at home and time to rest and sort out and think about what they are doing and how much they spend...father figures, husbands, also would...take time out on home and family matters’.

Theme 8: Responsible Gambling Signage and Information

Responsible gambling signage and information in venues attracted 52 comments, with three sub-themes emerging. Nine praised the signage, as ‘a significant impact on the way people perceive gambling’, while one explained that ‘recently, I read a pamphlet at my club which explained how poker machines worked - it was the most effective literature I have read in terms of promoting responsible gambling’.

However, 30 respondents felt the signage and information were ineffective, largely because ‘people take absolutely no notice’, especially problem gamblers who ‘don’t want to recognise they have a problem’. Others criticised the signs for being ‘non-confrontational and easily ignored’ and because they ‘become so familiar they have no effect. You can convince yourself they don’t apply to you’. Others saw problem gambling as an addiction, such that ‘notices will have little or no effect’.

Thirteen respondents offered specific ways by which signage could be improved – placing large warning signs on each machine, responsible gambling information accompanying membership renewals, free responsible gambling seminars in clubs, case studies of problem gambling displayed in venues and their newsletters, multi-lingual signs, more prominent and attention-grabbing signs, and having brochures displayed instead of patrons having to request them. Some advocated more signage, while others advocated fewer but more effective signs that, for example, warn of ‘the effects it has on a lot of families’, ‘how it can ruin a person’, and that ‘10 minutes on a pokie machine could equal an 8 hour working day’. Others were critical that any impact of signs was overshadowed in the gaming environment, as ‘they contrast poorly against poker machines that are illuminated by bright flashing lights! The jackpot signs on poker machines are large and enticing’.

Theme 9: The Physical Environment in Gambling Areas

Forty-two comments related to the physical environment in gambling areas. Six respondents wanted more visible clocks, with one noting ‘the X Club seems to hide its clocks...where no one playing can see them’. Most of these six respondents favoured clocks on every machine, or having the machine screen display the time at regular intervals to ‘help remind one how late it is’. One considered that, ‘like PA systems, there should be a recorded message at intervals to alarm players of the time’.

Seven respondents wanted brighter lighting in gambling areas. While some seemed motivated for comfort and aesthetic reasons (‘poker machine areas are usually so poorly lit and/or flashing with lights and noise, so smoke- filled and smelly, filled with haunted looking people’), two specifically noted windows help people remain aware of the passage of time, noting that ‘large clubs have become windowless, timeless gambling dens’ and that ‘a lot of clubs I go to don’t have windows, so you don’t know if it’s dark or light outside so you don’t know how long you’ve been playing’.

Eight respondents wanted better segregation of gambling areas, putting gaming machines ‘out of sight, so out of mind’ so they are not as visible and enticing ‘which immediately puts people at ease and in the mood to gamble’. One commented that ‘children shouldn’t be behind glass and see their family gambling’. Others seemed to want better segregation so they could escape the sights and sounds of poker machines, with one pleading to ‘remove poker machines from view...so as you can enjoy a bit of peace and quiet without

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listening to them. Musicals and loony tunes all the time'. Another complained that 'it sucks that there's not any place in the club where you can sit and relax and have a beer without pokies in your face'.

Twelve comments favoured a broader range of facilities and services in clubs as 'distractions to draw your attention away from the machines', with many criticising clubs for putting 'the main emphasis' on gambling and for being little more than 'gambling dens' and 'glorified casinos'. As one explained, 'the very fact that poker machines are the only entertainment (means) people play them after dinner, etc, and I think this is why...there are such a lot of people gambling; they are sucked in'. Additional facilities advocated included 'lounge facilities', 'recreation such as pool, gym, etc', 'areas to sit and watch sport', 'games room for parents and children', and 'bistros separate from gambling rooms'. These may overcome the problem of 'nothing else to do here when I'm by myself' and help to keep 'people in a group entertained (so) their gambling time would be less'. In contrast, four people praised clubs for their range of facilities and services, such that 'anyone can enjoy their club and never gamble'.

One respondent thought that armchair-style chairs at machines encouraged people to stay, while four advocated banning smoking as a responsible gambling measure, observing that 'a very large percentage of gamblers are smokers' and that a ban 'would probably go a long way in deterring people from just staying on and losing everything'.

Theme 10: Access to Cash

Forty-nine comments related to access to cash for gambling. Of these, 38 related to ATMs and EFTPOS. Twenty-two of these advocated removing ATMs and EFTPOS from gambling venues to 'alleviate constant withdrawals when money is gone', 'so that what money you take with you is all you can lose'. Alternatively, 'to make members leave the club and go to the nearest bank ATMs might help to change members' minds'. Five others felt ATMs were too close to gambling areas. As one explained, 'ATMs are not in the gambling area but I can reserve a machine for 3 minutes and go to the ATMs, withdraw cash and be back in 2 minutes', and another that 'the ATM is in the foyer just 10 metres from the gambling area. I see many people using the machine and going back into the gambling area'. Eleven comments suggested limiting ATM usage in various ways, including limiting withdrawal amounts ('e.g. \$200/ day/ account'); lowering the minimum withdrawal amount ('\$10-\$20 not \$40-\$50, i.e. they are forced to draw too much'); limiting the number of daily withdrawals ('a family member...was able to draw from the ATM seven times in one gambling session. I would like to see a limit on how frequently an ATM can be used'); and better controls so daily withdrawal limits could not be exceeded ('the bank...allows the customer to go over their limit with the use of other institutions' ATMs').

Seven comments were critical of cheque-cashing policies in clubs, with most wanting an outright ban as 'club policy on cashing cheques...could lead to over gambling'. One respondent also pointed out that, unlike banks, her club does not require two signatures to cash cheques from joint accounts. She explained 'my husband...sneaks to the club and cashes cheques deliberately to hurt me. I don't think clubs should cash cheques, period. They are not banks. Banks need two signatures sometimes and, in this case with clubs, I would want my signature also on our cheques'.

Four additional comments advocated cheque payment of winnings above a certain amount (\$50 to \$500). Another respondent had a novel suggestion for limiting access to cash, that 'there should be small safes. When you win you should...put that money into the safe until you go home and you are not allowed to return to the gambling lounge'.

Theme 11: Payouts and Change Procedures

Twenty-four comments were provided about procedures for obtaining payouts and change. Five criticised change procedures, with some noting that long queues and understaffing encouraged people to put larger notes into machines. As one explained, 'the queue at the cashier is always long to force you into putting \$50 notes into the machines but you can't get \$50 out without calling an attendant'. Others noted their club routinely provides many \$1 coins in change given for other purchases, with one commenting that 'the club I attend seems to have an unspoken policy of never giving \$2 coins in loose change at the bar or TAB. In my experience I have frequently received up to 4 single dollar coins in change', while another thought that 'customers are lured into playing poker machines with large amounts of \$1 coins in their possession'.

Nineteen comments were critical of delays in machine payouts to redeem credits and jackpots. This, they said, encouraged people to play off remaining credits or to play another machine while waiting for a jackpot to be paid. As one commented, 'sometimes you can't get your credit out of the machine - you have to call an attendant - who can wait half an hour for them to turn up! It is psychologically programmed to spend what credit is left rather than wait for coupon then cash desk, etc - very, very bad'. One complained that 'at the X Club, they take so long to pay jackpots I put more money into other machines while I am waiting', and another that 'if you only have ten or twenty dollars you will keep playing until you've lost instead of waiting for the attendant'. Many respondents saw this as an intentional 'go slow policy', 'so you gamble more' and that 'this is done deliberately'.

This problem has been exacerbated by the removal of coin dispensers on many machines, which many respondents claimed the clubs now favour. One complained that this as 'one of the tricks clubs use' and another that 'this forces me to either continue playing until (a) all the money is gone, or (b) there is enough money in the machine to warrant waiting for an attendant to issue a pay docket. Invariably this results in my walking away having lost'. Some respondents therefore advocated that 'all machines should pay out automatically'.

Theme 12: Gambling and Alcohol Consumption

Five people offered comments on gambling while intoxicated. One noted that 'no matter how intoxicated, I have never been refused alcohol while playing poker machines, nor been advised to stop gambling. Anywhere!' Four others noted that intoxication can lead to excessive gambling, where 'the more you drink the more you put in'. Another confessed that 'I'm not proud of my gambling habit. I haven't sought help for the reason that I keep telling myself that I can control the habit. However, with the help of a few beers all that goes clean out the door'.

Theme 13: Self-Exclusion

Self-exclusion attracted four comments. One respondent wanted procedures simplified, 'as simple as obtaining a form - freely available and in view of front counter - filling it in and

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signing it, enclosing your badge and depositing it in a box - this would spare people the embarrassment of having to confront management'. Another wanted family members to be able to have people excluded for gambling problems, 'as they are the innocent sufferers'. Another thought that self-exclusion should be noted on the person's driver's license so they could not cash cheques or pawn goods, while another noted that self-exclusion 'only works if you put your card in the machine'.

Theme 14: Gaming Venue Promotions

Gaming venue promotions received 18 criticisms. Nine noted that promotions are 'a very big incentive' for people to gamble while waiting for prize draws and 'often keep the compulsive gambler longer in the club'. One explained that 'some go for up to 2 hours and you have to stay at the pokies to win. I do not think this is responsible'. Another commented that 'if the clubs didn't advertise about winning a car on \$20 in their promotions I would not be there - to win a prize you must be present...so you are there playing the machines'.

The other nine respondents criticised that the style of promotions offered significant inducements to gamble, where 'everything they do today (is) to get us to play'. One observed that 'they have many promotions on in the pokie area - where members are encouraged to put their club card in a machine to be able to win. Free drinks are given to pokie players'. Many saw such promotions as very much against the spirit of responsible gambling, even though their club has implemented other responsible practices. For example, one noted that 'while many clubs comply with the law and wish to be seen as being responsible they still offer a lot of incentives for people to play poker machines, tickets to win a lot of prizes, spin wheels for prizes. They also have a lot of promotions based on people being in the club in an atmosphere that encourages gambling'. Another commented that 'they have promotions that require you to play the pokies to gain tickets in them. So as I see it, no place is promoting responsible gambling as the pokies is the way they make money'.

Theme 15: Gambling Venue Staff

Thirteen comments related to the role of staff in responsible conduct of gambling. Eleven advocated more intervention, such as 'if a staff member notices that a person is on a machine for a long period of time, to discourage them or make them aware of the time they have spent'; suggesting to gamblers 'they've had enough' after a certain time; inviting such people in to discuss the extent of their gambling ('supervisors and staff in all clubs know who the big gamblers are, but honestly does management ever care to invite these poor souls in for a friendly chat and tell them to cut back on their habit,? Not likely'); identifying problem gamblers and reporting them to supervisors ('I do believe the employees of any club need to be very aware and consistently on the lookout for problem gamblers, particularly concerning poker machines; the cashiers in particular, if they notice people coming to the counter to break down big notes into smaller notes'); and banning problem gamblers whom staff have identified ('I feel that there should be laws allowing supervision and action taken by the club to remove and ban patrons who exhibit signs of addiction to gambling'). Two respondents emphasised the need for staff training in responsible gambling, commenting that it 'is vital', and 'staff should be put through a program that makes them aware of sighting a problem gambler and reporting it to a supervisor so they can be helped'.

The Role Of Machine Design In Dealing With Problem Gambling

Poker machine design attracted the most comments of the 17 themes identified. Various aspects of machines were criticised and suggestions made to better promote responsible gambling (Theme 16).

Theme 16: Poker Machine Design

Poker machine design attracted 74 comments, grouped into 11 sub-themes. Five criticised the rapid rate of play, either for not giving enough entertainment time for money spent ('reels on new machines spin so fast - all over and done in a few seconds' and 'the machines sometimes are so tight that \$50 will only last about 10 minutes. I think this practice is wrong'), or for not giving people 'time to think'.

Eleven advocated better and more prominent information on the odds of winning, either 'on each machine', or on 'large signs at their (clubs') front doors', or for 'clubs...(to) advise you how much your winnings and losses are monthly'. One explained that 'if each machine had the odds of winning each prize maybe some machines may be avoided by those who need to be more careful with their money'. Another offered that knowledge about 'the odds of winning and also the totals of money contributed compared to what has been paid out would allow people to make a better educated decision on whether to gamble'.

Six criticised the 'disappearance' of machines that take coins, commenting that note acceptors 'sure can gobble up the notes' and make it difficult for gamblers to spend just a few dollars. As one explained, 'most machines require a minimum of \$5 to be inserted. Therefore immediately a casual gambler who may want to invest \$1 has to up the minimum by 500% in order to play'. Some advocated for machines to take lower denomination notes ('some ...reject \$5 notes which encourages gamblers to use higher denominations'), and that '\$50 notes and \$100 notes should not be accepted by gambling machines as in other Australian states'.

Nine comments advocated reducing the maximum bet on machines, with favoured limits being 50 cents, \$1, and \$3. One explained their reasoning as 'I've seen people betting \$5 or \$10 a push and I strongly believe this encourages people (especially addicts) to keep chasing the big win'. Four respondents considered that multiple betting lines encourage high expenditure. As one recalled, 'years ago pokies only paid on the centre line, there were 5, 10 and 20 cent machines and one container lasted a long time. Then they changed to three then five lines and we started losing more money. The real problems started when they started the 1 cent machines with 20 play lines multiplied by 2, 5, 10, 20, etc'. Another respondent mentioned the psychological allure of seeing winning combinations on adjacent lines, encouraging people to bet on multiple lines ('I find it impossible to play only 5, 10 or 15 lines because you always see the wins appear on the lines you are not playing...some machines now play 25 lines. Where will it stop!').

Seven people wanted machines to impose a time limit on playing, through automatic shutdown after a certain amount of losses or a set time period. As one commented, 'if a club adopts a fair dinkum approach to the problems of gambling...then adopt ideas such as restricting the amount patrons can invest by having a cut off point when losses hit a certain point - it is ridiculous to see fifty-dollar notes being inserted into cavernous hungry machines'. Another suggested a more 'punitive' approach whereby 'there should be an

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automatic shutdown on machines if you go over your time limit and whatever money is in the machine you lose because you weren't responsible enough to take it out before your time limit was up'. Losses and playing time could be monitored through inserting membership cards which 'should have a time limit built in to not allow you to gamble after a period of time' or through the venue 'monitor(ing) members' cards...and after 3-4 hours (or less) tell them to get off machine, like on internet'.

Six comments criticised linked jackpots as encouraging irresponsible gambling as 'people see this as another way to win lots of money - they also think that if they are betting more on their machine, it will increase the chance of winning the linked prize'. One respondent considered that 'huge jackpots (linking more than one club) should be banned', but the others advocated smaller, but perhaps more frequent, jackpots ('rather than huge link jackpots that are always paid out to those who bet large amounts there should be smaller payouts available to all players regardless of the amount gambled').

Sixteen comments related to the frequency and 'legitimacy' of wins. Two misunderstood how gaming machines work, perceiving the machines as 'rigged' or controlled by a central switch ('it only needs a button to be pressed in the control room to govern any payouts'). Four thought gambling would be more entertaining with a more generous win rate and that this would discourage people from betting large amounts to chase a big win. That is, people need to spend large amounts in 'the continual effort to win and have some pleasure'. As one explained, 'you could once have a good time playing but now the machines take, take, take. Can't they see this is where the problem has become worse? Instead of having a good time out, it has made it into gambling for something in return, not for a bit of fun'. Alternatively, three people favoured changing the odds of winning to make machines less attractive for either clubs or players. Two felt that wins should be displayed minus the amount bet. Others just felt the machines were too 'tight'. One saw cashless gaming as a way to limit losses, whereby 'clubs should introduce mandatory cards that patrons can charge/recharge with credits that have daily limits - say \$100'.

Seven respondents advocated more warnings on machines and better information displays, including regular on-screen warnings, displays in dollar amounts, and displays showing wins and losses and the percentage going to the government and club. Two noted that the music, noise and flashing lights on machines were too enticing as 'it hypes people up' and 'people get sucked in by the bright flashing lights and the WIN signs'.

The Role of Counselling in Dealing with Problem Gambling

The final stakeholder group mentioned as having a role in addressing gambling problems was problem gambling counsellors, with related comments grouped into Theme 17.

Theme 17: Support for Counselling

Five comments were made about counselling for gambling problems, all supportive of its potential effectiveness. Some comments included that 'more and more compulsory counselling is needed', 'counselling is definitely worthwhile' and 'I feel depression and maybe counselling/management training might also be very valuable to some people'.

Discussion

The qualitative comments summarised above are distinctive in that they give a voice to an often overlooked group in gambling research – the gamblers themselves. While the sentiments articulated largely speak for themselves through raising numerous concerns, criticisms and suggestions for change, some more general observations are now made about the results that reflect the status of problem gambling as an ongoing social issue that concerns club patrons.

First, the volume and depth of comments received reflect the widespread and high level of interest and concern amongst club patrons about the issues of problem gambling and responsible gambling. That over one-third of respondents recorded their opinions is testament to this, and indeed some respondents even attached additional pages of comments to their completed questionnaires. Clearly, these people generally feel that the current situation warrants change and welcomed the opportunity to have their say. This reflects the existence of ‘expectational gaps’ (Jacoby, 1971; Ackerman, 1973; Post, 1978; Wartick and Mahon, 1994; Reichart, 2003) between what is, and what the respondents consider ought to be, organisational behaviour in relation to gambling. In turn, this has contributed to the development of problem gambling as a social issue by fuelling this stakeholder group’s desire for organisational change (Wartick and Mahon, 1994; Reichart, 2003).⁹

Second however, the diversity of suggestions for change reflect ongoing controversy over problem gambling, its causes, contributors and remedies. This contestability over the sources, causes and solutions to a problem is another of the defining characteristics of an ongoing social issue, and exists when there is lack of agreement over how to close the ‘expectational gaps’ that are present (Wartick and Mahon, 1994). Thus, while this disagreement remains, it appears that many patrons will judge gaming venues (and governments that regulate them) as socially irresponsible in their gambling operations for failing to act ‘appropriately’ on an issue of widespread concern. This judgement, in turn, may result in poor publicity, loss of public confidence, litigation and more stringent legislation, all typical outcomes of a poor assessment of corporate social responsibility by stakeholders (Waddock and Mahon, 1991).

Third, the comments reflect controversy in three main dimensions identified as typically leading to an incongruent and unstable situation and outside pressure on the organisations concerned to be more socially responsible (Waddock and Mahon, 1991). Clearly, the qualitative data in this paper indicate that controversy still remains over the facts surrounding problem gambling (e.g. its causes and extent), goals to be achieved (e.g. whether governments and gambling venues seriously want to address problem gambling) and the means to achieve those goals (e.g. which measures are most effective in encouraging responsible gambling).¹⁰

Fourth, it is clear that most respondents consider problem gambling as a social or public health issue. While some comments reflected a view that problem gambling is a pathology

⁹ The role of numerous stakeholder groups in the emergence of problem gambling as a social issue in Australia has been analysed in detail elsewhere (Hing, 2002).

¹⁰ These three dimensions and the challenges they pose in resolving the issue of problem gambling in Australia have been analysed in detail elsewhere (Hing and Mackellar, 2004).

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or addiction, most nominated a variety of environmental influences on the development and maintenance of gambling problems, particularly the design of poker machines and numerous organisational practices in use in gaming venues. This recognition that gambling problems do not result just from individual 'weaknesses' but are influenced by broader contextual factors provided the basis for the advocacy of certain changes by governments, gaming venues and poker machine designers.

Finally, and consistent with the view of problem gambling as a social issue, most respondents clearly considered that addressing problem gambling and promoting responsible gambling are a shared responsibility. Consistent with the model of problem gambling developed by the Productivity Commission (1999), gamblers, gambling providers, governments, machine manufacturers, and counsellors were all identified as having an important role in reducing gambling problems in the community.

Conclusion

This paper has summarised and analysed over 25,000 words of 'additional comments' provided by respondents to a survey questionnaire on responsible gambling practices in NSW registered clubs. Three hundred and thirty-nine respondents provided 541 comments, which were grouped into 17 themes and 56 sub-themes.

The themes related mainly to the priorities of governments and gambling venues, numbers of poker machines, venue opening hours, signage and information, the gambling environment, access to cash, payouts and change procedures, gambling by intoxicated people, self-exclusion, gambling promotions, staff training and intervention, poker machine design, problem gambling, controlled gambling, responsibility for gambling problems, and motivations for gambling. Of these comments, most were critical of governments and gambling venues in their focus on gambling, of some responsible gambling measures considered ineffective, of certain venue practices that entice people to gamble, and of many aspects of poker machine design. While there was a good deal of concern and sympathy about problem gambling, a sizeable minority of comments noted that responsible gambling starts with the individual. However, the vast majority of respondents considered that much more could be done by gambling venues and governments to encourage responsible gambling and to minimise gambling problems.

While limited by sample size and selection, the results of this analysis indicate that, despite recent initiatives in responsible conduct of gambling, there remains a good deal of scepticism amongst club patrons about whether gaming venues are truly embracing responsible gambling and practising effective patron care. While many responsible gambling measures have been implemented, other venue practices are perceived as very much against the spirit of responsible gambling and warranting change. This continuing controversy and the 'expectational gaps' that remain continue to fuel problem gambling as a social issue in Australia. It is hoped that this paper has helped to articulate in some detail the opinions of one important stakeholder group – the gamblers - in this ongoing debate.

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