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Submission to the Productivity Commission

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I would like to start by thanking the Productivity Commission for all the work put in to producing the Draft Report and the opportunity for further comment on what I believe to be an incredibly important matter in Australia.

My comments will focus on Chapter Six "Gambling information and education", in particular warning signs for electronic gaming machines (EGMs). I would like to give my support for Draft Recommendation 6.3 but suggest that the immediacy of this recommendation be increased to mandate that all EGMs should include dynamic warning messages for players.

This recommendation is based on the results of a series of studies examining the effectiveness of currently mandated static harm-minimisation signs in New South Wales (NSW) as compared to pop-up messages that appear on EGM screens during a forced break in play (Monaghan, 2008; Monaghan & Blaszczyński, 2009). This research utilised two samples of regular EGM players (young adults and club patrons) and found that the content of currently mandated messages was poorly recalled by players and had little impact on gambling-related thoughts and behaviours. This is consistent with the findings reported in the Draft Report from the Commission's survey of clients of problem counselling agencies.

In contrast, the content of pop-up messages appearing on EGM screens for approximately 15 seconds during a forced break in play were accurately recalled by the majority of participants (to a significantly greater extent than static messages). Participants reported that pop-up messages had a significant impact on their gambling-related thoughts and behaviours during a session of play on a simulated EGM. Furthermore, participants recalled pop-up messages two weeks after seeing them and reported that these had increased responsible gambling thoughts and behaviours during subsequent sessions of EGM play. In particular, pop-up messages increased gambler's awareness of time during play and their session length.

Pop-up messages appear to effectively capture attention and facilitate message comprehension with an immediate and longer-term reported effect on gambling-related thoughts and behaviours. The importance of breaks in play to assist individuals to gamble in a responsible and controlled manner is apparent in some of the other recommendations of the Draft Report. The recommended changes to EGMs including limiting maximum cash inputs, setting pre-determined limits, shutting down EGMs for a set period of time and stopping play to pay large prizes with a cheque all support the effectiveness of a forced break in play to assist gamblers in playing responsibly. As noted in the Draft Report, dynamic messages can be implemented for little additional cost; therefore, it is recommended that pop-up messages that appear in a forced break in play be implemented on all EGMs in Australia due to the effectiveness of these messages in facilitating responsible gambling behaviour. Furthermore, pop-up messages could be an effective responsible gambling strategy for other electronic forms of gambling including electronic table games and Internet gambling (Monaghan, 2009).

The Draft Report also commented on the most effective content for warning messages. I strongly agree with the conclusion that all warnings should be market-tested for effectiveness prior to their introduction and their impacts should be assessed. However, I do not agree that monitoring help-line services is the most useful method of achieving this goal and that more empirically-based research methods should be used to directly measure the impact of signs on EGM players.

The study described above (Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2009) examined the most effective message content in addition to evaluating the mode of display of warning messages. Current warning messages aim to provide information (chances of winning the maximum prize) with the aim of reducing irrational beliefs and increasing informed choice. However, such informative messages were shown to be significantly less effective than messages encouraging players to reflect on their own behaviour and whether it is appropriate for the current situation (e.g. Do you know how long you have been playing? Do you need to take a break?). These self-appraisal messages reportedly had a significant impact on increasing responsible gambling thoughts and behaviours during sessions of play and in subsequent sessions of play in the two weeks after the experimental session. In particular, these messages increased participants' awareness of the time they had been playing, the length of a session, and the likelihood of taking a break. This empirical study demonstrated that self-appraisal messages had the greatest reported impact on player's thoughts and behaviours. These messages were perceived to be significantly more effective in modifying player thoughts and behaviours in accordance with the aim of responsible gambling strategies.

An evaluation of the literature on the use of warning signs to encourage responsible gambling suggests that current initiatives are not effective in protecting individuals from gambling-related harm. Warning signs informing players of the odds of winning and the nature of EGM play, risks associated with gambling or the time they have spent playing are ineffective in modifying gambling behaviour (Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2010). It is recommended that warning signs with appraisal-oriented message contents be implemented to enhance the potential of warning signs to reduce gambling-related harms.

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