

Women's Health Tasmania Inc.

Submission to the Joint Select Committee  
on Future Gaming Markets

December 2016



Women's Health Tasmania

## **About Women's Health Tasmania**

Women's Health Tasmania (WHT) is a universal service, available to all women in Tasmania. It seeks to increase the range of services, and its reach, to women vulnerable to inequitable health outcomes due to social or economic determinants. WHT acknowledges the impact of societal influences such as income, education, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability and isolation on health outcomes, and seeks to reduce the negative effects of these factors on individual women.

WHT is part of a national network of women's health centres. It is a health promotion charity funded by the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services, guided by the World Health Organisation's definition of health – "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

WHT provides a safe, supportive environment for women. It is run by women, for women, and aims to promote positive health outcomes by providing a diverse range of services, taking a holistic approach. This perspective on women's health has seen WHT at the forefront of preventative health in Tasmania.

WHT's vision is for Tasmanian women to be informed, supported and active decision makers in their own health and wellbeing. As a result, WHT has also been a key advocate on issues such as a woman's right to make informed choices about her health. Our leadership has been evident in a wide range of health policy, in social justice and gender equity. WHT consistently advocates on behalf of women with both State and Commonwealth governments, on a range of legislation and policies impacting on women's health.

In recent years, WHT has broadened its service delivery component by undertaking outreach activities, offering a state-wide information telephone line and using electronic technologies. It currently provides services to women from 74 different postcode areas.

WHT continues to provide direct services to individual women and to advocate for, and promote, the health and wellbeing of all Tasmanian women. Our knowledge and expertise is based on 28 years' experience working with, and for, the women of this state.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Future Gaming Markets.

Women's Health Tasmania  
PO Box 248  
North Hobart Tas 7002  
Ph. (03) 6231 3212  
info@womenshealthtas.org.au  
www.womenshealthtas.org.au

WHT is very pleased the Tasmania Parliament is considering community attitudes and concerns regarding Future Gaming Markets in this state. Community sector organisations, in particular Anglicare Tasmania, witness the impact gambling on poker machines has on the lives of individuals and their families when accessing their services. The Social Action Research Centre (SARC), part of Anglicare, has produced many reports and submissions over the years, based on thorough research informed by the experiences of community services, and individuals whose lives have been impacted by gambling and their families. We note, SARC with their extensive knowledge base and understanding of the complex issues surrounding gambling in this state, are calling for poker machines to be confined to casinos in the future.

WHT also believes there are too many, easily accessible, poker machines in this state, and that these should be reduced in number and confined to casinos. Of particular concern is the number of poker machines in venues in low socio-economic areas. Some venues go to great lengths to keep patrons absorbed in the machines, in rooms without natural light or clocks to indicate the passage of time. WHT cannot support an activity in which private businesses and the government profit from machines deliberately designed to addict people, potentially causing a great deal of financial suffering which impacts on both their physical and mental health. It is our view the costs to individuals, and the community, far outweigh the money collected by the state government.

It is our understanding the Tasmanian Government is not reliant on poker machine revenue. In fact the tax collected from poker machines, located outside of the casinos, is around just \$30 million a year. The Tasmanian Treasurer said the policy will be guided by community views, not revenue considerations. (SARC, 2016)

Through our work in the Mary Hutchinson's Women's Prison (MHWP) we are aware many of the women incarcerated have experienced drug and alcohol problems, and/or mental health issues. Some women have described enjoying the rush of gambling on the pokies when affected by drugs. Like drug and alcohol problems, gambling is an addictive behaviour used, by some people, as a form of escapism from issues impacting on their lives - including long-term hardship, trauma, chronic pain, isolation, disability and unemployment. Gambling when affected by drugs, alcohol or mental health issues, obviously severely impairs an individual's decision-making capacity. (Law, 2010)

In an Australian Institute of Criminology study of Incarcerated Female Offenders, it was found gambling debts were associated exclusively with fraud and theft offences. In fact, 92 per cent of women who said the reason for their current offence was to acquire money to pay a gambling debt had committed a fraud offence, and 83 per cent were regular fraud offenders. (Johnson, 2004)

In the research paper, *Nothing left to lose*, which examined cases on the Tasmanian Supreme Court database from January 2004 to December 2009, Law stated “until public policy truly protects people from an activity that can cause devastating harm, public policy is tricking people into thinking gambling is a harmless activity. The gambling industry knows how to market its products to encourage people to gamble and to keep on gambling, and we know regular gambling is more likely to lead to gambling problems than occasional recreational gambling. What the review of these cases clearly shows is ordinary people are doing things they would not ordinarily do, committing serious crimes because of a gambling problem that leaves them with nothing left to lose.” (Law, 2010)

Participants in research conducted by SARC, and described in the *House of Cards* report, stated the loss of money through gambling caused them stress and often meant they went without food or had difficulties paying bills, which caused them further stress. (Law, 2005)

Unfortunately, stressors in a relationship, like problem gambling, can lead to domestic violence. There is clear evidence women are over-represented in the statistics. Evidence shows one in six women, and one in 20 men, have experienced at least one incident of violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15. (ABC Fact Check, 2016) Research has also established that, rather than being a few isolated acts, violence against women is a pattern of behaviour violating the human rights of women and girls, limiting their participation in society and damaging their health and well-being. (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2013)

WHT’s purpose is to advance women’s health and wellbeing in Tasmania. We know problem gambling is associated with poor health outcomes (Productivity Commission, 1999; Australian Medical Association, 1999; Public Health Association of Australia, 1997) so we must, therefore encourage the government to limit the opportunities to gamble.

The impact of gambling on the pokies is not limited to one individual; it is estimated one person with a gambling problem affects five to ten others. The financial consequences on a family, with a member who has a gambling problem, can be dire. It can result in not being able to afford preventative health services and medication for a child, and/or being able to provide adequate nutrition.

Many studies have found ill health such as headaches, abdominal pain, heart pounding, insomnia, sweaty hands, shaking, and nausea, associated with gambling problems (Productivity Commission, 1999).

Spending money on gambling, instead of groceries, may result in food insecurity, which in turn leads to poor nutrition and associated poor health. Losing large sums of money, relative to income, and the experience of conflict with family members is extraordinarily stressful and can lead to difficulties with depression and anxiety. (Law, 2005) People experiencing severe gambling problems have been found to have an incidence of poor health twice that of people experiencing low level gambling problems (Gerstein et al, 1999, in Productivity Commission, 1999).

The Productivity Commission (1999) found approximately 50% of people with gambling problems had experienced depression in the previous year, with 22% of people reporting 'often or always' feeling depressed because of gambling. The Commission (1999) also found almost all people seeking counselling help for their gambling suffered depression. These figures compare to 5% of Australian adults reporting depression lasting 2 weeks or more (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 1998, in Productivity Commission, 1999).

People living with a mental illness are particularly vulnerable to problem gambling. Research conducted by Anglicare, into the issues of poverty and mental illness, found people with a serious mental illness often experience a high level of social isolation, and find it extremely difficult to participate in the community (Cameron & Flanagan, 2004). The research also found many participants with a serious mental illness valued gambling as "a social activity, an escape from loneliness and often their only chance for social interaction" (Cameron & Flanagan, 2004: 56). People with mental illness are also particularly vulnerable to being trapped in a cycle of social disadvantage (cited in Cameron & Flanagan, 2004). Problem gambling would exaggerate this disadvantage even further.

The participants in the *House of Cards* study experiencing mental illness reported they faced particular difficulties in controlling their gambling. The results of excessive gambling were particularly catastrophic for them. Participants with medically-diagnosed mental illness reported the stress of coping with gambling problems exacerbated their experiences of anxiety and depression, and increased their need for medication and support from mental health services. (Law, 2005)

The issues, an individual may first have turned to the pokies to escape from, are soon exacerbated by problem gambling. It is easy to visualise how problem gambling can become a vicious cycle, which can spiral out of control causing even more hardship to an individual and their family.

The social licence for poker machines in pubs and clubs is tenuous. One in three Tasmanians knows someone seriously affected by gambling on poker machines; four out of five Tasmanians want poker machines reduced or totally removed from pubs and clubs. (SARC, 2016)

Sadly, more than \$200 million is lost on poker machines every year by Tasmanians; this is money not spent in local businesses and circulated in our local economy. Not surprisingly, small businesses in areas with many poker machines have reported a decline in business since pokies were introduced. (SARC, 2016)

Pubs and clubs should be places people interact with friends and family, rather than being glued to the screen of a machine eating their financial resources. Of course, support will need to be provided to pubs and clubs with poker machines to transition their business model. Perhaps the removal of poker machines from venues will see a revival of a local live music scene.

WHT requests the Tasmanian government make the decision to remove poker machines from pubs and clubs, not increase the machine numbers in the casinos, and make them safe and fair. This is the most effective way to address problem gambling on the pokies. Sadly, harm minimisation measures, to date, have not reduced the impact on individuals and families. (Jones, 2011)

This is an opportunity for Tasmania to be the first state government to take poker machines out of our communities. We would not be the only state to confine pokies to casinos, as Western Australia has always done so.

We also ask the government to continue to fund counselling and other support services, for people harmed by poker machines and problem gambling.

Problem gambling on poker machine costs too many Tasmanians their health, relationships, job, home and/or freedom. The costs to our community far outweigh any revenue collected by the state government.

The decision to remove poker machines from local pubs and clubs should be based on public health grounds. It is important to remember Tasmania banned smoking in pubs and clubs as a public health response, and fears the pub scene would collapse when the bans were introduced have proved unfounded. (SARC, 2016)

## References

- ABC Fact Check, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-06/fact-file-domestic-violence-statistics/7147938>, 15 Apr 2016
- Australian Medical Association (AMA), 1999, Health Effects of Problem Gambling, AMA Position Statement: Canberra
- Garcia-Moreno, C., Pallitto, C., Devries, K., Stockl, H., Watts, C. & Abrahams, N. 2013. Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. Switzerland: World Health Organisation
- Jones, C. (2011) *Submission to the Discussion Guide: Social and Economic Study of Gambling in Tasmania*: Hobart: Anglicare Tasmania Inc.
- Johnson, Holly. (2004) *Drugs and Crime: A Study of Incarcerated Female Offenders*: Canberra: Research and Public Policy Series: Australian Institute of Criminology
- Law, M. (2005). *House of Cards - Problem gambling and low income earners in Tasmania*: Hobart: Social Action Research Centre.
- Law, M. (2010). *Nothing left to lose*: Hobart: Social Action Research Centre.
- Productivity Commission, 1999, *Australia's Gambling Industries, Report No. 10, Ausinfo*: Canberra Public Health Association of Australia, 1997, *Gambling and Health Policy*, Public Health Association of Australia: Canberra
- Social Action Research Centre (SARC) website, <http://sarc.good.do/getthepokiesoutoftasmaniaspubsandclubs>, 2016