

John Sabados

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN - Submission to current inquiry into harm minimisation

My name is John Sabados and I have gambled compulsively for 17 years. I have been in recovery for a while now and I am grateful to have been given a chance to voice an opinion of how my recovery went (or is going) and where I believe improvements should be made to make this journey easier for other compulsive gamblers and of course all of you here – trying hard to help these individuals.

I have started my own internet support group in April this year, and have been involved with some others before that. I'm happy to say that the membership is growing slowly and the group now holds 82 members from all over the world, mainly Australia, US and Canada. And because I have been involved in trying to help other compulsive gamblers in finding a new positive life after gambling – I have noticed a pattern forming of where some obstacles are still in the way for gamblers trying to give up, even though the Government came up with some law alterations to help along the way (which is not enough and more needs to be done). I will attempt to give my opinion as a compulsive gambler in recovery on some of these issues (which is the opinion of majority of gamblers in recovery) and where we think more can be done to ease the situation more. From less important to more important in that order (however, every point is very important):

Introduce a law where every club and pub must allow at least \$99 to be paid out by the machines. Although not every gambler will stop at that level, there will be many more that will stop, take the money out and leave the club before they lose it. I have heard from many gamblers that some clubs and pubs don't allow even a dollar to be taken out without an attendant being called to pull the money out. Some venues have even chosen not to allow coins to be played in their machines. Which means that notes will be played, losing more money than intended which in many cases triggers a chase. That is nothing but exploitation by those clubs and pubs over those gamblers that will get into a situation of not being able to control the stop button.

Bring the maximum of payout in cash to \$500 instead of what is now \$1000. It is always better for the gambler to take that \$500 out and have a chance to change their mind by going home instead, than for them to reach \$600, \$800 or even worse, \$900 and keep going trying to reach that elusive \$1000 - then losing everything in the process, chasing that loss. And believe me that will happen in many cases – I have done it countless times, losing all the winnings, where perhaps if I was to be forced to take the cash out at \$500, I may have had a chance to change my mind and go home. That is not to say that gamblers will still take the cash out and try another machine, but even a moment of thought about the money and where it could go is a chance of changing minds and going home.

I still hear a lot of gamblers complaining that if they have seen the clock and the time, they may have realized sooner of how long they have been gambling. Yes, the law says that every gaming room should have a clock on the wall somewhere. Problem is though, that not everyone can see it from every position in that room. Now, it's silly to think that maybe 5-10 clocks should be placed on every side and in every angle. But what is wrong with the screens. All those machines are computer operated and I can tell you that while I work on the computer every day at home. I can always tell the time – because it's on the screen. How hard would it be to include a digital time piece on the screen of every machine in the gaming area. Large enough and prominent in the top corner of the screen for the person to see at all times. To some people that could literally mean a life saver, stopping that destruction hopefully sooner before it gets way out of hand (as though it isn't already with many).

Self-exclusion program. That is a great deterrent and I applaud for all Governments for introducing it, however it should be said and I have heard it happen many times – it doesn't always work. People have still gone to the premises they have banned themselves from and gambled without being noticed at all. In some cases, so many times in fact that people kept losing for months and no one noticing. In Canada, a case has been won by the gambler suing the casino for allowing him back in to gamble and breaching the contract. That case has been followed closely by many in Canada, America and here in Australia and may have consequences on future similar cases. People that are involved in gaming such as the clubs, pubs, TAB, Australian Gaming Council will say that it is still a gambler's choice. That no one can put a gun to their heads and say they can't gamble. True and in a democratic society, that is relevant, but also an excuse. Because a gambler at the heights of gambling doesn't know about choice. In minds of many there is no other choice but to chase and chase. Too many lies, too many debts, too many secrets are just too great to overcome. And so, a gambler in dire straits will find a way to gamble and will overcome such obstacles to try and win their money back. With so many places to gamble in Sydney alone, a gambler will ban themselves from one or two and at most times to make a partner happy, but in the back of their minds there are many other pubs and clubs they can go to without being known or noticed. A much better system needs to be made if this is going to work – otherwise it's a waste of money. Very few benefit from it and it will be those that have some discipline in their character. A smart card that I have read about being chased in Victoria maybe an option. Another is a centralized camera operated system which recognizes faces on the computer files and sounds an alarm, similar to the system used in football matches around the world.

Not enough is being done for early prevention and harm minimization with more advertising and/or within the education system. All the support groups, counselors, psychiatrists, church leaders and family members will tell you that compulsive gamblers come for help when it's too, too late. When life is almost lost, marriage in divorce proceedings, houses lost, huge debts accumulated – leaving the families devastated – when something could have perhaps been prevented in some better way. I have to applaud Gambling Impact Society of NSW – situated in Nowra NSW (their web link is: <http://gisnsw.org.au>) – who are trying to get the Gambling Awareness Week to kick off Nation wide, something that South Australia have done last year. But, they are fighting with finances to get this accomplished. More needs to be done within the education system – either by having talks with students in front of the class, some brochures or

booklets printed and given to the schools as handouts – because it is the next generation that will get stuck in this quagmire of gambling being available everywhere – and a lot of them will get caught up in this addiction. More advertising needs to be done to make people aware of the problem and to make compulsive gamblers stop and think of where they are going if they continue. Prevention is always better than cure (for which there isn't one yet). People can only keep it in check, most probably for the rest of their lives.

I know that the date for all this was 15th of November, however I was only notified of this by the NSW Council for Problem Gambling yesterday and I wasn't aware of it before than. Please, I would be grateful if this was considered for your Inquiry on behalf of all compulsive gamblers in recovery and any potential future ones.

Thank you for your time

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