



# Gambling, a public health issue

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**Let's listen in on a** hypothetical conversation...

“Do you have a problem gambling?”

“Nope! Most of the time, all I need to do is look up and there's an opportunity!”

Not so hypothetical, is it? Gambling has been around for thousands of years, always carrying with it the chance of a ‘big win’ and a usually higher chance of losses. Though increasingly socially acceptable, the potential benefits of gambling must be weighed against its potential harms. Gambling is very much a public health issue.

Part of the problem with gambling is that it is masked by misconceptions. First, gambling is portrayed, and seen, as a harmless pastime for adults. This image is strongly encouraged by the so-called gaming industry, of whom governments might be the most guilty. It is portrayed as entertaining, fun, glamorous and perhaps most of all, as a way to achieve financial freedom.

There are elements of truth in the advertising, of course. For a miniscule few, a big lottery win or lucky streak on the slots can mean thousands or millions of dollars. Did we say miniscule? Perhaps that is an exaggeration: the odds of getting all seven numbers right in the Super 7 lotto are one in 62,891,499 (yes, almost 63 million). In case you are feeling lucky, the odds of being struck by lightning are only one in 240,000 — don't go out in a storm.

It is estimated that two percent of Canadians (not of those who gamble) over the age of 15 have a gambling problem. A problem gambler is one who has a continuous or periodic loss of control over gambling. He or she will be preoccupied with gambling and with obtaining money to gamble, and will continue these

behaviours despite adverse consequences.

Gambling continues to be a growing issue, and given its characteristics, should be approached as one of public health. The first concern is with the inequitable distribution of revenue. Since gambling returns go primarily into general revenue for the province, we should all be seen as benefiting. However, those who have invested (gambled) nothing gain the most, while a disproportionate number of people who participate in certain types of gambling are those who can least absorb the losses.

A second concern is that even if the problem is successfully treated, the damage to loss of wealth cannot be undone. This can carry over for years, decades, even generations. Finally, there is a false belief that ‘self-control’ is the best method for controlling problem gambling. All the anti-gambling campaigns and education combined won't make a dent in the overall harm produced by gambling.

As such, the best approach to managing the effects of gambling is to use a harm reduction strategy. Among the strategies that will help are to reduce the number of li-

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icensed lottery outlets; eliminate advertising of gambling activities; enforce the legal age for buying lottery tickets; reduce the number of VLTs (Video Lottery Terminals), and establish a moratorium on new casinos.

The harm that comes from loss of wealth from gambling produces a fallout that affects a community's health. Crime does increase, families are torn apart, children suffer and people do harm to themselves. Of course, the damage is done to only some of those who gamble, but the effects extend far beyond them and their families into their community. Gambling is a public health issue.

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