

# The Royal College of Psychiatrists

## Briefing for the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Gambling Bill

The Royal College of Psychiatrists is the statutory body responsible for the supervision of the training and accreditation of psychiatrists in Britain and for providing guidelines and advice regarding the treatment, care and prevention of mental and behavioural disorders.

In the course of their work, psychiatrists deal with people who are in difficulty as a result of excessive gambling. The Royal College is therefore concerned about the impact that the Gambling Bill will have on the incidence of excessive gambling.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists appreciates that there is a need to update the regulation of gambling. The Royal College therefore welcomes the following aspects of the Gambling Bill, subject to certain provisos:

- The setting up of a Gambling Commission, which should regulate all gambling **including** the National Lottery and spread betting.
- The removal of gaming machines with jackpots from **all** locations where children can have access to them.
- The first attempt to control remote gambling, on the understanding that this Bill will only be effective to a very limited extent, since it does not deal with overseas sites.
- The control of 'fixed odds betting terminals', which are in reality very addictive gaming machines.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists made a submission to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport regarding the Report of the Gambling Review Body and provided written and oral evidence to the Joint Committee on the Draft Gambling Bill. The Royal College is therefore concerned that this evidence has not had any significant effect on important aspects of the Gambling Bill now before Parliament.

In particular, vital parts of the Bill are based on faulty assumptions regarding the nature of excessive gambling, with frequent references to a relatively small number of "vulnerable persons" who need protection. The facts are otherwise.

- There is a large amount of research evidence indicating that gambling, especially the 'hard' variety, such as gaming, is a very addictive activity to which **all** are vulnerable.
- The most important factors determining the incidence of excessive gambling leading to disorder are the availability of gambling facilities and the social pressures encouraging participation.
- The policy of providing gambling on the basis of unstimulated demand is the only effective way of making it available to those who wish to gamble, while ensuring that this is done in moderation.
- The relatively low number in the UK of those who are at present in difficulties as a result of excessive gambling is due to the longstanding, unstimulated demand policy. The figures are almost certainly an underestimate. In any case, they do not include relatives, friends and others who are also seriously affected by the disorder.
- The Government's assertion that, while expanding the gambling market in the manner proposed, it will be possible to control the inevitable large increase in

excessive gambling, is naive and totally unjustified. It is also inconsistent with the experience in other countries where gambling has been deregulated.

- Treatment of excessive gambling and educational programmes to prevent it, while desirable, are of limited value, especially if public policy allows the demand for gambling to be stimulated. A policy of "socially responsible gambling" in such a setting is a contradiction in terms.
- The proposition that increasing gaming facilities will assist in 'regeneration' ignores the realities of commercial gambling. In general, the long-term consequences for individuals and societies who attempt to deal with financial difficulties by gambling are highly damaging.

There are already relatively more casinos in Britain than in most other countries. They are easily available to those who wish to take part in gaming. Moreover, there is no public demand for additional facilities or any of the deregulation of casino gaming that this Bill will introduce. Indeed, in general, there is considerable opposition to them and the pressure to make the changes is coming solely from gaming promoters.

Over and above this, The Royal College of Psychiatrists would draw attention to the view expressed by the Gaming Board in its 1996 Report that,

*"To a large degree, the extent, and potential adverse consequences, of problem gambling have been controlled in this country by the restrictive regime applied to gambling generally and to gaming in particular. Of especial relevance to this have been the principle that facilities should be no more than adequate to meet the unstimulated demand for them and the controls on advertising and promotion, on access to gambling facilities and on gambling on credit."(para. 1.19) .*

The Royal College of Psychiatrists therefore recommends that the Gambling Bill should be restricted to what the Prime Minister has stated is "90% about better regulation, better protection for children". The present limitations on casino gaming should be maintained and the remainder of the Bill dealing with its extension and deregulation should be abandoned.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists is firmly of the opinion that, while the regulation of gambling urgently needs to be updated, the Bill in its present form is very likely to result in a considerable increase in individual and social disorder as a result of excessive gambling.

**Further information regarding any of the above issues can be obtained from:**

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