

Editorial

Gambling can seriously damage your health

Simon Attard Montalto

Gambling is one of the earliest forms of entertainment and an ancient activity, possibly dating as far back as the middle pre-history Palaeolithic era (circa 50,000 years ago).¹ Dice, dating to before 3,000BC, have been discovered in ancient Mesopotamia (now Western Asia), gambling houses have been recorded in China in 1,000BC, early playing cards in the 800s AD, and the first casino opened in Venice, Italy in 1638.¹ Gambling, gaming and betting have been defined interchangeably but, arguably, equate to one another.² Gambling is known to become addictive, and is reinforced by repeated losses. It can be stratified, ranging from 'none', to 'occasional', 'recreational', 'at risk', 'problem' and finally 'pathological' gamblers. However, this is a continuum and all 'problem gamblers' started off as non-gamblers and 'worked their way up the ladder'. Gambling is mostly associated with male gender, and 'pathological gamblers' make up around 0.1-3.0 (median 1.5)% of any given western population, increasing to 2.3-13.0 (median 5.4)% if 'problem' and 'pathological' gamblers are combined.³

Problem gambling is intricately associated with health, social and financial problems.^{4,5} The odd flutter may amount to a harmless folly, but habitual and compulsive betting has dire repercussions for the individual in terms of health, finances and secondary problems to fund increasing debt with, in some cases, recourse to criminal activity.⁴⁻⁷ 'Problem' gambling has been estimated to cost the taxpayer in the UK around £1.2Bn per annum, mostly for additional NHS services.⁸ The situation for gaming is similar to that of smoking and alcohol – all have a dire impact on individuals, families and society, yet governments 'tolerate' these, and 'balance' this tolerance by gambling-derived income and taxation.⁹ That said, the global annual turnover of the betting/gambling industry is enormous, around \$450 billion in 2020, and estimated to top a staggering \$648 billion by 2027.¹⁰

Cover Picture:

'despising the poor'

stoneware ceramics

By Joseph Agius

Joseph Agius is a senior staff nurse at the Fairyland Ward. He has been working there for the last 30 years. However, his hobby of ceramic sculpture has become his passion and he has established himself as one of Malta's foremost ceramists. He tends to favour a social neo-realist aesthetic. His profession as nurse exposes him to a world whose fabric at times includes pain, diseases, despair and death. World news is another source of inspiration. Agius chooses linguistic metaphors and figures of speech as springboards for his creations. The titles of his works have a metaphorical origin which Agius interprets as a narrative in clay.

Professor Simon Attard Montalto

Editor, Malta Medical Journal
Head, Department of Paediatrics
The Medical School
Msida, Malta
simon.attard-montalto@gov.mt

Hence, any tax 'hit' is easily absorbed with little impact on the industry itself and often, rather hypocritically, offset by exemptions and offshore tax-friendly sweeteners.^{9,11}

The debate for and against gambling has smouldered for centuries, with governments, authoritative bodies and even religions taking widely divergent positions.¹² The 'modern' penchant for an inactive lifestyle encourages entertainment to be sought elsewhere, and the gambling community has been quick to exploit this niche and migrate gambling in diverse forms and guises on-line. High-street (any street!) betting/gambling outlets have mushroomed, in line with on-line betting websites. In 2020, COVID restrictions have not helped, and contributed toward increasing the growth of the industry's global earning by an estimated 5.6%.¹⁰ A bet can be 'posted' on anything and everything, and at any time. Bets on the FIFA 2018 World Cup were estimated to have reached €136Bn,¹³ whereas 26M Americans laid bets on the Super Bowl final in 2020, spending \$6.8Bn.¹⁴ Gambling advertising has become ubiquitous, particularly in association with sponsorship for individuals, teams, institutions and diverse sporting events. Betting-related advertising amounted to 17% of all advertising during the 2018 World Cup.¹³ The sheer arrogance of intrusive betting advertising, often clothed in nauseatingly bombastic narrative, is astonishing. Promotional interruptions during key sporting events are commonplace, and Malta is not immune (remember the full-screen advert

lasting almost a minute during the most recent world cup final?).

In its defence, in Malta as elsewhere, the industry and legislators have 'built in' numerous checks and balances ensuring regulation and with the aim of preventing excesses.^{9,10,15,16} Similarly, this industry contributes significantly as an employer and toward the GDP: in 2019, Gaming employed approximately 7,500 persons, and added €1.56Bn, or 20% of the total, making it the third largest sector in Malta.¹⁵ However, betting is, essentially, based on the concept of 'something for nothing' (or, at least, for very little). In reality, the hype and glamour surrounding mega-wins is all spin and simply adds gloss to the more down-to-earth (and sordid) reality: namely, that the overwhelmingly vast majority of punters lose their money. In its latest issue, whilst recognising Malta as a leading gaming jurisdiction that is home to many of the world's biggest online gambling affiliates, the *Global Gambling Statistics* reports: ". . . another interesting top 10 member is Malta. The small Mediterranean island boasts a small population but one of the largest per-capita losses anywhere in the world."¹⁶ Sobering words indeed.

The industry is extremely slick at publicising the 'big' (but rare!) wins (effectively, using these as their lure), whilst simply ignoring the vastly greater losses sustained by everybody else! This imbalance needs to be addressed, and it may be opportune to add, as with smoking, an official *caveat* on all betting advertising: **'Gambling can seriously damage your health'!**

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