

Action is needed to prevent a gambling addiction crisis

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It seems gambling is everywhere in Britain today. In 2016, according to Nielsen, £312 million was spent on advertising gambling, and even this understates what was spent promoting it online. Professional sports, particularly football, carry gambling logos on their shirts; perimeters at stadia are lit up with gambling websites; and the sports pages in newspapers are awash with gambling sponsors.

Young people are growing up in a world very different to the one I grew up in. Technology is driving that change. Commercial gambling is now easily accessible and increasingly normalised. The rise of betting on eSports and the investment of Premier League clubs in young eSports players are the latest developments. In the next 12 months, it is likely more than half of the revenue generated by gambling businesses operating in Britain will be online. Social and video gaming offer an easy transition into gambling and increasingly the difference between gaming and gambling is not clear.

In the last few years, much concern has been expressed about gaming machines in bookmakers, and reasonably so. However, all gambling products carry risks and we must demand that all those profiting from commercial gambling do everything possible to protect players, especially young people, from being harmed.

As a society, we should be concerned about the rising risk of harm from wider access and growing, more regular participation in gambling on future generations, resulting in a possible public health crisis in gambling addiction. There is already cause to be concerned. Lottery products are legally available to 16 and 17 year olds, with 40% in the form of instant games. Alarmingly, according to research 11% of lottery product retailers failed to prevent children who could be under 16 purchasing gambling products.

Increasingly, GambleAware is contacted by local authorities concerned about gambling. From West Sussex, to Leeds, to East Renfrewshire, frontline council staff are worried. One leader of a public health intervention team also coaches a youth football team. He noticed, before and after each game and during every break in play, many of these young men were on their phones, placing bets. When a young apprentice walked into the office one Monday morning and announced the extent of his wins and losses that weekend, the coach decided gambling was an issue that needed his attention.

There is no academic evidence that gambling advertising causes problem gambling – although we do know it is particularly hard to resist if you are a recovering problem gambler. But, there is no academic evidence that gambling advertising is harmless. With the average age at which children start to watch post-watershed TV unsupervised being 11½, restrictions based on a 9pm watershed may offer little protection.

We need to balance the current array of commercial gambling advertising with information about the risks of gambling, and where to get help if it becomes a problem. I'm not alone in this view – in particular, broadcasters are already taking the lead in working with us to address growing public concerns. But others who profit from gambling also need to step up and recognise the responsibility that comes with such riches. Online advertisers like Google and Facebook, newspapers, professional sports clubs and major sporting venues should join the effort. They can help people avoid the slippery slope towards the hell of a gambling addiction, and ensure those who need help know where to find support.

Above all, we need better leadership from the gambling industry. It is in its own interests that it is seen to lead the world as the safest place to gamble. There are industry initiatives underway and these should be welcomed and encouraged, but there is more to be done.

GambleAware already requires a minimum of £10 million annually to meet the short-term needs of the National Responsible Gambling Strategy, and we expect funding will need to increase in the future. Under the current voluntary donation arrangements, the industry contributed £8 million in 2016, 20% shy of what is needed. We continue to see the merits of maintaining the voluntary system of funding for research, education, and treatment. However, our first priority has to be providing sufficient help for all those who seek it, and so we would support a statutory levy if the voluntary system fails to deliver.

Our focus remains exclusively on minimising the harm caused by gambling, both to gamblers and those around them. We have bold ambitions to increase the availability of early intervention, treatment, and to make such services more accessible, but such ambitions come with a sizeable price tag. We will continue to fund innovative interventions, and ground-breaking research, as well as arguing for gambling to receive the attention of the public health community.

For many, gambling is an enjoyable leisure activity, and the industry creates jobs and pays taxes to fund public services. But for three-quarters of a million people, there exists a very real risk of gambling-related harm. And for young people especially, growing up in a society where gambling is increasingly pervasive, the potential for this number to grow significantly is real. We all have a responsibility to take action to prevent any future crisis in gambling addiction.

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