

The role of charities in the treatment and prevention of problem gambling.

A paper given by Anthony Jennens, Chairman of GamCare, UK, to the 14th International Conference on Gambling and Risk Taking on Tuesday 26 May 2009.

In this paper I draw on the experience of many years in the field of addiction and most particularly the last twelve when my attention has been focussed on Problem Gambling. I have had close links with Gamcare from its inception and I have had the privilege of being the Chairman for the last five years. The views contained in this paper are mine. To the best of my knowledge they coincide with those of my Fellow Trustees and the staff of Gamcare, but for anything provocative, outrageous or indeed inaccurate I and I alone take responsibility. (I hope this is more convincing than Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister of Britain who, after one of the many scandals of recent times, went in front of the television cameras to say "I take full responsibility for this matter which is why those responsible have resigned")

I have sought first to identify what it is that the different parties involved in establishing a responsible gambling regime - government, industry and the consumer - are seeking to achieve; then to review and summarise recent experience in the UK; and from this to draw out what needs to be done, what works, and the extent to which delivery by charities has contributed to the success we have had in creating a viable and efficient infrastructure. I note that there is much more to do, but conclude that the way forward should be to build on a successful model rather than trying to replace it with something unproven.

What do Governments want?

I suggest that Governments want - indeed, need - a coherent, publicly respected and effective strategy on responsible gambling, one that is delivered cost-effectively and at least possible cost to the taxpayer. This strategy needs to encompass research to underpin both prevention and treatment programmes.

They want this strategy to deliver these benefits:

- Consumer protection
- Maintaining and developing a successful & responsible gambling industry
- Maximising its tax take
- Minimising media criticism
- Minimising lobby group criticism

In the UK, and elsewhere, the Government wants to keep its role to the minimum: it will set the legislative and regulatory framework but no more. It wants the regulator to implement the regulatory framework, and the industry to play its part in funding and delivering a responsible gambling strategy. Ideally, this will be achieved with the minimum of statutory intervention.

What does industry want?

Businesses want the freedom to pursue and develop legitimate business opportunities with minimal interference, so they can meet, and shape, customer demand and deliver customer satisfaction. This will deliver:

- Profits for shareholders
- Customers coming back, new ones attracted
- A good reputation for the company and the industry as a whole
- Minimising media criticism
- Minimising lobby group criticism

And what about the player?

The player wants:

- Freedom to do what they want
- Value for money (where for most, value = enjoyment and good service)
- To be confident they won't be defrauded, tricked or encouraged to gamble excessively
- Simple ways to tell whether they can trust the operator
- Simple ways to get help quickly, when they need it

The key thing coming out of all this is how similar these objectives are. Everyone wants simplicity, freedom to make their own decisions, good customer service (which includes reassurance about safety and support), help when and where it is needed, money used efficiently and wisely. A responsible industry is delivering what the customer wants, what Government wants - and what it wants.

But I also note that Government and industry - I suspect, inevitably - are wary of each other. While industry does want Government to take responsibility and give leadership where it should, it also wants minimal Government involvement and is suspicious of its motives. It also believes the Government should use some of the (substantial) tax take from the industry to contribute to prevention and treatment. Government wants industry to act responsibly, and to pay for prevention and treatment (praying in aid the "polluter pays" principle), but doesn't have confidence that, left alone, the industry will do either of these things.

A brief history of the UK experience

In the UK, the industry actually has a good record as responsible operators - something that is too often forgotten. Many companies (though not all) have recognised both the real and the PR value of being promoters of responsible gambling. They have been prepared to make cash available, voluntarily. But, quite rightly, they want to see their money used carefully, wisely and effectively - and they certainly don't want it lost in tiers of bureaucracy.

Government has wanted the industry to take responsibility for prevention and treatment. But while it doesn't want to deliver these programmes itself, nor does it believe the industry should be in control - this would invite suspicion of bias and conflicts of interest.

So we have had a system whereby the industry set up an organisation to collect money and distribute it to fund research and treatment, and more recently some education.

This money has been spent, largely, by:

- Us at Gamcare, with some also going to a residential treatment centre called Gordon House.
- Some has been spent on research and education, though this has lacked direction and achieved little.
- The rest has gone on what many have seen as ineffective methods of collection, bureaucracy, and "consultants". ("Those who can, do, those who cannot, consult.")

Our funding has increased substantially over the last ten years, and last year it represented about two thirds of the funds raised and distributed by the industry. This increase in our funding does not signal a proportionate rise in the number of problem gamblers, rather it indicates that after 12 years more people are becoming aware that help is available and are seeking it. However, it is still only a tiny percentage of all problem gamblers - probably less than 1% - who know how to find us and make the effort to do so.

So the system has, sadly, not been as successful as we all would have wished, and the Government has spent more than a year reviewing it. The problems they identified were:

- There was no overall strategy for research, prevention or treatment
- The industry was not raising enough money, nor was the funding flow reliable
- This meant providers couldn't plan for the medium term - we continue to stagger from year to year, leading to uncertainty, short-termism and waste
- There were concerns that the industry might have too much influence over research, in particular

We still await the final outcome of that review. It is still possible that Government will impose a levy on the industry. All the time, demand for treatment and support, and the need for a prevention programme, grow.

What is clear, though, is that over the years we in GamCare, working with a number of other charitable partners around the country, have been building a viable and sustainable infrastructure for supporting gamblers and their families and friends. We have

- Established a single national HelpLine, advertised in all gambling venues across GB with details prominently displayed on all machines; that HelpLine now answers over 2500 calls a month, and demand is growing fast
- Established a counselling service in London which provides treatment for more than 70 people every week
- Built partnerships with agencies around the country to offer GamCare-standard counselling that is now available to over 60% of the population
- Introduced an online HelpLine - the NetLine - which already receives over 300 calls a month
- Developed an online counselling service
- Trained hundreds of company employees in responsible gambling practices and skills

A lot done, of which I am very proud - but there is an awful lot more to do. Yet I see many clouds, not just on the horizon but some directly overhead.

The threats

So far, though the system clearly must be improved, we have successfully avoided some important pitfalls, and I hope we can continue to do so. So as well as introducing reforms, I argue that we must continue to be aware of, and resist, some ever-present threats to our success.

In my view, the threats are these. Government control and direct government funding corrodes independence, builds bureaucracy and stifles passion, commitment and innovation. The UK government - and all the main UK political parties - believe this themselves: they say it often enough!

Where appointments to organisations are made by politicians, then the organisation loses its independence, becomes political itself. More importantly, an organisation loses its heart: the Trustees are no longer driven by the urge to make a difference, to sort something out that they know something about; instead there is a danger that they are looking for preferment, looking to their own self-interest. Most importantly, the voice for the customer, the gambler, the person in need, is lost. We in GamCare see these people as men and women with a problem who need help to deal with it. There is real danger if organisations start to regard the people themselves as the problem.

Where funding comes from the Treasury, it brings with it constraints, rules, regulations, complication, bureaucracy - inevitably and irresistibly. It also tends to put the bureaucrat rather than the expert practitioner in control - and we end up with constant change for change's sake, with policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy, with fudge and delay, and a hundred reasons not to do something.

It also brings with it the risk of dogma, of "one size fits all solutions". For example, the doctrine that competition is always desirable and necessary to drive out inefficiencies; it's notable that more and more voices in our health service are now being raised to point out that over-zealous commissioning is threatening cooperation and partnerships built up over years. For example, that we must know the price of everything, but seem to forget how to weigh the value of anything. And for example, that you clearly can't trust anyone, so you make them count the beans, but you don't believe them so you count them again for them, you challenge and second guess the experts and the practitioners, and make hay when they get it wrong (which they will - that's how they learn what works).

Why charities deliver

Sadly, the UK Government's recent review has focussed a lot of attention on what's been wrong with the system. I'd like to focus on what's been achieved, and how far that may be because it has been delivered by charities independent of both the industry and Government.

Let's look at the nature of a charity. A charity:

- Brings together people with passion and commitment, who bring with them a wide range of experience, expertise, knowledge
- They're in it because they care, not for the profit, the salary or the bonuses (there is no remuneration of any kind and you certainly don't gain popularity)

- Their starting point is the player - they're a voice for those who need help
- They provide real independence - both in analysing the problem and delivering the solution
- Because of this, they can gain the trust, respect and confidence of all interested parties - government, industry, the public, the lobby groups
- Their natural instinct is to cooperate not to compete: if someone else can do a job better, let them do it, and we'll get on with what we are good at
- They can be flexible, innovative, free of civil service bureaucracy
- But they still provide accountability.

Not a bad model, is it? But how far can this account for the success GamCare has had so far - and for the confidence shown in us by the industry, which has increased our funding nearly threefold over the last 5 years, and by Ministers, who have consistently praised and supported our work?

The key test is how does this model match up against the things that government, the industry and the public want? - the common objectives I identified earlier.

Rather well, I think. A charity provides that "honest broker" between industry and Government which both can trust, because its agenda is the agenda of the person in need - and this is both the industry's customer who expects service and the Government's consumer who may need protection.

We are not judgemental. We recognise that gambling brings pleasure to a lot of people, but that a few will need help - and the damage that it can do to those few, and all those affected by them, can be considerable. They're the ones we're interested in - to identify, support and treat them, ideally to prevent them falling into the black hole in the first place.

We are not involved in big P politics. We have no interest in "spinning" statistics - what good would that do for those who need help?

A charity provides a delivery vehicle which can be flexible, adaptable, innovative, quick on the ground - and unbureaucratic. It can give the simplicity and focus which everyone wants.

We don't need a profit. All the money available to us goes into the services, into helping those who need help.

Some argue that competition is the only way to ensure value for money. I would argue that a charity has a different, but most effective, driver for efficiency: those involved care about what they do, and they always want to do more. They naturally go the extra mile, not to become rich (charities aren't exactly generous to their employees, though I hope we look after ours, and Trustees work for free) but because that's why they are there in the first place. They want to know what works, they want the cash to work hard, simply because they want to do more!

I think these features have been the foundation for the success of GamCare so far, and see no reason why they should not be the foundation for future success. A lot of time, effort, commitment - and a lot of the industry's money - has gone into building these foundations. They're strong, and they can support much more - so why look for a new model?

The way forward

This is why I hope that in the UK we can make a voluntary system work. And I also hope that we can have a strategy-making system that is expertly advised and informed, and that is not blinded by process and dogma. Most importantly, I hope they are able to see that we are not starting with a blank piece of paper, but rather that the project is already well in hand. The necessary infrastructure is already in place, and a lot of people who really care about those in need - the gambler who loses his wife's savings and rings us because he is desperate, the daughter who rings because her mum says she'd rather die than tell her husband she owes £18k on her credit cards - just want to get on with the job they've started.

It is true that my description of a charity - and particularly Gamcare the charity which I have the privilege of chairing- may not be thoroughly objective. Indeed, I am happy to admit that we are by no means perfect, as pioneers in the field in the UK we have made wrong turns and we have learned by them, but I make no apology for our and in particular my own lack of diplomacy and patience. We must do more and we must do it better. In part, though, this is an essential feature of the charity model - people who are committed, who care, and see something that needs to be done, just want to get on with it. All vehicles have breakdowns, have things going wrong. They also need continual adjustment and improvement. But that doesn't mean that you should throw out the design, the investment, and start again. Much better to work with it, nurture it and help it to improve itself.

If we've learnt one thing from the experience of our banks and financial institutions in recent months, it's that competition, the profit motive, targets that take people away from what they know into areas they don't understand, will all conspire, eventually, against the realisation of the original objectives. Let's not lose sight of our common objectives, or the fact that we're already a long way down the road towards delivering them.

To end, let me return to the key thing that drives GamCare: identifying what the problem gambler needs, and providing it. Actually, it's not that difficult. Imagine your debts are growing and out of control, you're hiding your gambling from your partner and family, you're about to lose your job because they can't rely on you, the stress is building and building and you are, quite simply, desperate. What do you need?

I think it's pretty obvious. You need someone who will be there when you ring and who can provide expert confidential help, free of charge, when you need it and non-judgementally. That person can help you through the crisis, and then put you in touch with other support - be it counselling, debt advice, stress management, help with relationships - quickly and in confidence. So you need a HelpLine manned by professional advisers able to gain your trust quickly and offer both emotional and practical support, backed up by links to specialist and general referral services. You need to be able to get that HelpLine number easily and quickly - from your Lottery ticket, your poker website, your local arcade, your betting shop's advertisements, slips and leaflets, and also from your GP, your debt counsellor, your Citizens Advice Bureau, your health centre, your local authority, and of course from Yellow Pages and Google.

This is what we do. Being a charity has helped us do it well. We just need the freedom to get on and do more of it.