

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

A summary of 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.

For more than 12 years, treatment services for problem gamblers in Great Britain have been provided by charities (predominantly GamCare) and funded by the gambling industry. Some industry funding has also supported research and limited education initiatives. During this time, GamCare working with a number of other partners around the country has built a viable and sustainable infrastructure for supporting gamblers and their families and friends, encompassing:

- A national HelpLine, answering over 2500 calls a month
- A counselling service in London providing treatment for more than 70 people a week
- Counselling services available to over 60% of the rest of the country
- An online helpline (NetLine) and counselling service
- Training for hundreds of company employees in responsible gambling practices and skills.

I believe that much of this success has been due to delivery by a charity that is independent from both Government and the industry. Government and industry, whilst in fact wanting much the same things from a responsible gambling strategy, are inevitably wary of each other. A charity provides that "honest broker" which both can trust, because its agenda is the agenda of the person in need - who is both the industry's customer who expects good service and value for money, and the Government's consumer who may need protection.

A charity has many advantages. It:

- Brings together people with passion and commitment, and with a wide range of experience, expertise, knowledge
- They're in it because they care, not for the profit, the salary or the bonuses
- 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
- They can be flexible, innovative, free of civil service bureaucracy
- But they still provide accountability.

This model has proven its value - so much so that industry has been willing to increase our funding nearly threefold over the last 5 years, and Ministers have consistently praised and supported our work. We have so far avoided excessive central control and direct Government funding, which would corrode independence, build

bureaucracy and stifle passion, commitment and independence. We have also successfully built productive partnerships and not wasted valuable resource on unnecessarily complex, and disproportionate, distribution mechanisms.

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 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 just want to get on with the job they've started.

The key thing that drives GamCare is to identify what the problem gambler needs, and provide 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.