

ABC Australia



'Gamble responsibly' is an ad, not a deterrent

May 16, 2012

[Charles Livingstone](#)



'Responsible gambling' is the mantra that most Australian state and territory governments invoke to describe their efforts to address problem gambling.

Some years ago, a colleague and I wrote that "responsible gambling is a carefully structured, if elastic and goalless term" transferring responsibility for industrial-scale harm production to the end user.

I was reminded of this the week before Anzac Day when I came across a message in a flowerbed near the Shrine of Remembrance on Melbourne's St Kilda Road. The message, in carefully arranged plantings, read 'GAMBLE RESPONSIBLY'.

Responsible gambling is so important a concept that it has an annual celebration, as well as its own flowerbed. Responsible Gambling Awareness Week this year runs from May 14-20.

The sponsors and partners for RGAW in Victoria include Crown Casino, ALH (the pokies-operating arm of Woolworth's), Racing Victoria, Clubs Victoria, the Hotels Association, local governments, [and others](#).

State governments presumably believe that the 'gamble responsibly' message is evidence of their concern about gambling problems, and will assist people who gamble to do so in a 'responsible' manner.

This year's Victorian campaign focuses on young people, pointing out that with technological advances it's easier than ever to gamble, and that three out of four people in the state gamble.

The key messages are: don't lose control, set your limit, and keep things in balance.

Fair enough. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support the proposition that slogans, as a way of influencing individual behaviour, are effective, unless they're complemented by much more active strategies.

This is particularly so when the approach taken in most of the RGAW material appears to suggest that gambling is something most people do, and is thus quite normal, and that it has the characteristics of a force of nature. That is, gambling has always been with us and can't be avoided.

In reality, gambling in its present forms has been around in most Australian states only since the early 1990s, when a wave of deregulation allowed pokies venues in most suburbs and towns, and casino licences were handed out. Similarly, sports betting as an online phenomenon dates only from the mid-2000s.

Gambling has ancient origins, but the shape of the gambling market is entirely up to individual governments. Most international jurisdictions do not permit what has been allowed in every Australian state bar Western Australia, where pokies are still restricted to a single casino (demonstrating, incidentally, that wall to wall pokies are not inevitable).

In other words, there are a lot of forces at work in determining who gets into trouble with gambling, and most of them have little to do with individuals.

Even if you feel that the answer to gambling problems lies in personal responsibility, it's important to realise that successful public health campaigns to improve health and minimise harm employ a range of strategies.

For example, smoking rates have declined in Australia not because clever slogans caution people against smoking.

Tobacco use is declining because active regulation of smoking has made it illegal to smoke in hotels, restaurants, workplaces, schools and so on, the advertising of tobacco products and tobacco sponsorship of sporting teams is prohibited, and because cigarettes are heavily taxed and therefore expensive.

Health warnings and advertising reinforce the messages conveyed very directly by such regulation, and help to explain why it's necessary. On their own, however, they are ineffective.

The same applies to road safety. Safer cars, seatbelts and better roads, the introduction of random breath testing and speed cameras, and more deliberate enforcement of other road rules has brought about a massive decline in road trauma.

Graphic advertising has a role to play in reminding people of the rules and explaining why they're necessary. But sloganeering would not have reduced the road toll.

The 'responsible gambling' message is focused on consumers, not on industry. Sure, there are schemes to encourage gambling operators to provide their wares in a responsible way. But no

Australian government requires that poker machines – the largest single cause of problem gambling in Australia by a factor of four to one or more – be safe to use.

There are therefore several problems with the 'gamble responsibly' message. The first is that it normalises gambling. It suggests that gambling is a perfectly reasonable thing to do and that most people can handle it.

In this sense it is, in fact, not far from the gambling endorsements that adorn football players' outfits, scoreboards and TV coverage these days. The message is: if you can't handle this obviously enjoyable, popular and harmless activity – well, that's your problem. You're irresponsible.

This is an idea that permeates government and industry attitudes towards gambling, particularly poker machine gambling. The actual responsibility for gambling problems boils down to the individual.

In fact, after two Productivity Commission inquiries, it is clear that the responsibility for gambling problems can be largely laid at the door of the gambling industry and state governments. Forty per cent of pokie revenue comes from the pockets of people with an established gambling problem. Another 20 per cent comes from those on the path to such a problem. This is an industry that feeds on addiction, for want of a better term.

The current marketing rules for sports betting allow children and adolescents to be exposed to massive amounts of advertising while watching their sporting heroes, whether at the game or on TV. Expert after expert has warned that the next wave of gambling problems will likely come as the result of such unprecedented exposure to the message that gambling on just about everything is great fun.

None of this is inevitable. All of it can be changed. None of it has anything to do with individuals.

In other words, governments are passing the buck. The way to address gambling problems is to adopt strategies that worked in road safety and tobacco control. Change the rules to make gambling safer and less likely to cause the catastrophic harm readily on offer at any suburban pub or club in NSW, Victoria and most other parts of Australia. Especially the most disadvantaged parts.

How do we change the rules? For poker machines, Australia's number one gambling problem, simply by acting upon the recommendations of the 2010 Productivity Commission report. That is, introducing pre-commitment - the deal our current Prime Minister reneged on in January (after the gambling industry bludgeoned her backbench into submission), and which the Victorian government also abandoned this year, using the PM's back down as a smokescreen.

Or introducing \$1 maximum bets, as proposed in a bill introduced into the Senate earlier this year by the unlikely partnership of Senators Xenophon, DiNatale and Madigan. And limiting the advertising and sponsorship of sport by gambling businesses.

If Responsible Gambling Awareness Week entailed governments accepting their responsibility and adopting serious measures to reduce the harmfulness of gambling, I'd be an unabashed supporter. As it is, it's hard to escape the conclusion that it's a façade, staged by the industry and promoted by state governments addicted to gambling revenue and in deep denial. And who desperately seek to shift the blame for avoidable social damage entirely of their own creation.

Charles Livingstone is with the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University.