

Health Officer Council of BC – Position Statement

Gambling – Draft August 26 2011

Health Officers Council Position

When government is involved in revenue generating activity that has potential for harm, as is clearly the case with gambling, then it has a substantial obligation to do so in a manner that results in minimal harms to its citizens. In particular, it must take into account the potential impact on vulnerable and marginalized citizens who are at increased risk of these harms.

HOC therefore recommends that government show visible leadership towards a solution to this growing public health and social problem as demonstrated by:

- Instituting a moratorium on expansion of gambling pending complete public discussion of a thorough assessment of the health and social consequences associated with problem gambling. This assessment should include an assessment of the health and social impact of increased gambling on low income families and particularly children in these families. This assessment should specifically examine the effects of expanding availability of very reinforcing forms of gambling such as video lottery terminals and on-line gambling. Expansion should not be re-initiated until clear evidence shows that any expansion or implementation of new gambling modalities will not cause an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling.
- Reversing the decision to establish the *Playnow* website.
- Launching a new initiative for the prevention of problem gambling.
- Increasing spending on prevention and treatment of problem gambling to at least to the Canadian provincial government per capita spending average.
- Dedicate a recurrent budget to research into the distribution, determinants, prevention and treatment of problem gambling.

Background Concerns

(sources – HOC Resolutions and Discussion Paper: *Government Sponsored On-Line Gambling*)

Gambling is a significant public health issue due to the large numbers of people affected, the seriousness of the adverse effects (including disruptions in all major areas of life: psychological, physical, social or vocational, including bankruptcy, job loss, marital breakdown, problematic substance use and suicide), the disproportionate effects on groups in the population who can least bear its effects (e.g. those with lower income, indigenous people), and the trend of increasing problems, including among youth and women.

A recent survey revealed that 4.6% of the adult population of BC are problem gamblers. This translates into a best estimate of 159,000 total problem gamblers, including 128,000 moderate problem gamblers and 31,000 severe problem gamblers (19.5%). While the overall prevalence of problem gambling is unchanged since 2002, there has been a statistically significant increase in the estimate of severe problem gambling. When families are included the estimate is an additional 5 to 10 people (spouses, family, co-workers) are affected for each individual with a gambling problem, making the true impact closer to 12-25 percent of the population.

Government is increasing accessibility to gambling by expanding and promoting on-line gambling. The Government of British Columbia in August 2010 launched *PlayNow* a government-run on-line gambling facility, the only government in North America to do so.

On-line gambling, being so accessible and without effective social barriers, is becoming more popular and has a particular attraction for youth and other groups at risk for problem gambling. Internet gamblers are more likely than other gamblers to experience problem gambling. The numbers of participant as well as numbers of problem gamblers are expected to increase as more sites are established.

The expectation that *Playnow* will produce an ongoing net revenue benefit will be offset by cumulative long term health and social costs associated with this activity such that the net benefit in terms of revenue to the province will be negative when one takes onto account the direct and indirect costs of human suffering that arise from problem gambling.

BC spends the least amount per capita of any province on problem and responsible gambling.

BC has no recurrent budget dedicated to research on the prevention of problem gambling.

Regulatory capture, which is a process by which regulatory agencies come to be dominated by the industries regulated, is a threat to regulation in the public interest.

There is an inherent conflict of interest between minimizing harms of gambling and operating and relying on gambling for government revenues.

There are risks of infiltration by organized crime, which brings with it subsequent risks of violent crime.