As published in *Addiction* 111(1):11-12.

Integrity without extinction: paths forward for gambling research

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Summary: Identifying a substantial problem in gambling research, Livingston and Adams make useful proposals for remedy. But conditions are suggested for funding from the proceeds of gambling, as an alternative to Livingston and Adams' proposal to cut off this source.

Key words: gambling research; research funding; industry influence; government monopoly; gambling; alcohol

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Livingstone and Adams (1) are responding to what is apparent to anyone with some familiarity with the gambling literature: that the orientation and research questions have been constrained by the influence of the sources of funding for much of the research. In countries which I know well, the gambling field is unusual in the high proportion of its funding which comes from agencies or interests with a vested interest in the gambling market. There are two main reasons for this imbalance. First, gambling is not a central interest of primary research funding bodies, and of the academic establishments they serve: it is peripheral to medical research, and on the fringes of concerns of academic social science. So (even more than for alcohol and other drugs) it is difficult to get it funded through general research support mechanisms. Second, gambling research money comes from bodies which are strongly connected to organisations involved in promoting or preserving the market. It has almost always been a form of "conscience money", often as a counterbalance in the course of legalising previously prohibited forms of gambling. But, despite this provenance, the funding bodies, including government authorities (e.g., 2,3), have often exerted control on what research is done, defining research agendas in ways compatible to market interests.

The responses Livingstone and Adams propose for this situation are mostly appropriate; indeed, items such as disclosure of funding sources (point 4) are essentially standard practice. In their point 1, subpoint (iv) deserves support: industry interests should have no influence on research priorities or choices. But in my view the rest of point 1 requires further consideration. A successful campaign to cut off such research money would throw the field on the mercies of the primary research funding bodies, and might well essentially shut down the field.

While I agree that tying the amount of research funding to fluctuations in the gambling market is a bad idea, the more general proposition that research on countering the social problems caused by a problematic product should be paid for out of revenue or profits from it makes a logical connection

– a connection which is often politically saleable. A tax impost on tobacco, for instance, was the original basis for funding VicHealth, the successful health promotion organisation in the Australian state of Victoria; a parallel model of an impost on tobacco and alcohol was adopted to fund Thai Health, which has made research and policy contributions internationally as well as in Thailand. Such arrangements can be a well-justified part of taxes imposed in view of "externalities" (including harm to others than the purchaser) which are not accounted for in the price of a product.

But the source of the research funding should not carry with it industry influence on what research should be done. This influence on the nature of the research (whether from private interests or from state monopoly agencies) is the problem Livingstone and Adams address with their point 1. However, examples from other fields show that it is possible to fund research with integrity from state revenue from problematic products. For instance, the Swedish retail alcohol monopoly, Systembolaget, funds research on alcohol problems through an arms-length 9-member alcohol research council run by a nongovernmental agency, with 6 members named by the relevant research society and three to represent the "general societal interest": "The Council decides independently of Systembolaget on the applications received, on the basis of the project's scientific quality and societal relevance" (http://www.can.se/sra, translated from Swedish) (4). At the University of Washington in the U.S., the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute "receives financial support from the State of Washington under state Initiative 171, which mandates that a portion of fees collected for certain state liquor licenses be allocated to the two state research universities for research on alcohol and drug abuse, and dissemination of research information" (5).

Both of these arrangements derive from a circumstance where the state monopolised much of the retail market in alcohol. The state certainly has mixed interests in alcohol (6), as in gambling, and there are examples of state alcohol monopolies (e.g., New Hampshire – [7]) which privilege the fiscal interest as much as many gambling monopolies do. But alcohol monopolies generally have a better record (8) than gambling monopolies of giving due consideration to minimising harm -- European gambling monopolies are being pushed in this direction only by the threat of dissolution by the European Court of Justice unless they demonstrate a "sincere and honest" public welfare interest (9).

Here are three lessons which can be drawn from the alcohol experience for conditions on dedicating research money from the proceeds of gambling: (1) the money should come from government revenues, not from private gambling interests; (2) the general object should be research which will inform or contribute to minimising harm from gambling; and (3) the processes of defining research calls, of evaluating proposals, and of deciding on funding, should be outside and removed from the influence of any entity involved in the market, and under the oversight of a health or social problem agency or department.

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