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CALL TO ACTION FOR GAMBLING DISORDER IN THE UNITED STATES

The 1 October 2017 mass shooting event in Las Vegas was perpetrated by a man who, according to media reports, exhibited behaviors suggestive of a significant gambling problem [1]. While it is not unequivocally clear that the man had a gambling disorder, this tragedy raises important questions about gambling and its potential role in this particular disaster. Feelings of isolation, despondency and suicidality, mixed with (1) a perceived injustice, (2) a disregard for and violation of the rights of others and (3) the availability of lethal means to kill and injure a great number of individuals in a short amount of time can result in disastrous events. A tragedy of this magnitude is rare, but human suffering is not. The relationship between suffering and gambling disorder is complex, because suffering can lead to maladaptive gambling and vice versa. We must learn more about gambling and its potential role in human suffering.

We are writing this letter as a call for action in the United States. American society does little to help those suffering from gambling disorder. Resources for gambling-related prevention, treatment and research are sparse. The American Psychiatric Association classifies gambling disorder as an addiction, and estimates that it affects up to 1% of individuals from all walks of life [2]. Harms include financial ruin for individuals and families, significant guilt and shame, disrupted social relationships, engagement in illegal behaviors, occupational impairment, despair and suicide. The impact of these harms is greater than the harms associated with many well-researched medical and psychiatric conditions [3] and, unfortunately, few with the disorder seek treatment [4].

Our call is to the gambling industry, state authorities and the federal government to take a proactive role in mitigating the harms associated with gambling products and to invest in research that leads to better understanding of gambling disorder and its prevention and treatment. We call for all stakeholders to step forward.

The paradigm of using a small portion of gambling-related revenues to fund state-level gambling-related prevention and treatment in the absence of a systematic approach to gambling-related problems diffuses responsibility and is a passive patchwork response to the harms associated with gambling. However, unlike other commercial products with a propensity for addiction (e.g. tobacco), the gambling industry includes many and diverse stakeholders: private industry, Native American tribes and state governments that run lotteries ($n = 45$). Moreover, the federal government collects approximately $8 billion dollars annually via taxation of gambling winnings [5]. Thus, each stakeholder benefits financially from gambling. We call for each stakeholder group to step forward and address gambling disorder.

First, responsible gambling initiatives by the gambling industry are critical and need greater support and examination of efficacy to ensure that patrons use their product safely as a form of entertainment and recreation. This step probably requires regulatory oversight. Secondly, the gambling industry and all levels of government need to improve access to prevention, treatment and recovery services for gambling disorder; and finally, the federal government, as the largest funder of biomedical and public health research, needs to fund research programmatically, focus on gambling disorder and monitor the impact of gambling activities on society.

Overall, more could and should be done to understand, prevent and treat this condition by the American gambling industry and by state and federal governments. We note that many of the points raised here may also apply to other countries around the world.

We call for three primary initiatives.

1. For the gambling industry to make greater investment in identifying and validating responsible gambling initiatives.

a. Human suffering associated with gambling can no longer be the sole responsibility of government to address. Casinos and other gambling stakeholders must engage in greater accountability to ensure that their products are used safely. In fact, frequent and/or excessive gambling is frequently rewarded through loyalty programs and complementary items. If left unaddressed the industry may encounter exposure to legal liability, as do alcohol servers and the tobacco industry. We call on the gambling industry, in conjunction with gambling regulatory agencies, to advance public health initiatives that utilize evidence-based approaches to advance responsible gambling [6].

2. All stakeholders within the gambling industry and the federal government need to improve access to prevention, treatment and recovery services for gambling disorder. The points of contact for offering a range of services for gambling problems are underdeveloped.

a. We call for increasing the visibility and impact of resources to assess for gambling-related harms at gambling venues. These programs must be proactive and non-stigmatizing.

b. For example, fewer than 13 000 Americans sought publicly (state-)funded treatment for gambling problems—despite estimates of more than 600 000 people currently afflicted with the disorder. Approximately 10 states and the District of Columbia do not currently offer any state-funded problem-gambling treatment, despite gambling-related tax revenues being collected in 48 of the 50 states [7]. We call for all states to offer free and easily accessible treatment for gambling disorder and to engage in stigma reduction efforts to address this critical barrier.

c. We must increase the identification of individuals with potential gambling problems and access to treatment via gambling helplines, referral networks and screening in settings where gambling disorder prevalence is elevated. We call on addiction treatment centers, community mental health clinics and criminal justice settings to implement routine screenings for gambling disorder and to create outreach efforts in the community to reach problem gamblers who are not engaged in formal treatment, which represents the majority of problem gamblers.

d. While Gamblers Anonymous (GA) is a free self-help resource, few with gambling disorder utilize GA in a way that results in sustained recovery [8]. We call for the development of alternative treatment options. Treatments for gambling disorder currently are underdeveloped and researched inadequately. There is a definite need to fund the development of novel approaches for reaching and treating those with gambling disorder.

3. The federal government needs to conduct and fund research programmatically regarding gambling and its mental and physical health consequences.

a. We call upon the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to fund research surrounding the etiology, prevention and treatment of gambling disorder. Currently, unlike other addictions such as alcohol, cocaine and opiates use disorders (e.g. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institute on Drug Abuse), no institute at the NIH has gambling disorder within its research mandate, and thus gambling disorder research is not funded. We ask that NIH funding dedicated to the study of gambling disorder be allocated and placed within the research mandate of an NIH institute.

b. To monitor and study the impact and harms associated with gambling, we call upon the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other government agencies to consistently include a six-item assessment of gambling behavior and gambling disorder in their epidemiological surveys, such as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. These items would assess gambling frequency, amount of time spent gambling, amount risked and a three-item gambling disorder screen [9].

To achieve these primary initiatives, public–private partnerships can provide a new and collaborative strategy for progress. By joining together, all who profit from gambling can contribute to helping those who are at risk for or currently experiencing gambling-related harms. These partnerships require recognizing the various stakeholders' overlapping interests regarding responsible gambling, preventing gambling disorder and providing treatment for all those who suffer with gambling-related problems.

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