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Gaming machines: harm, protection, and the discourse of business as usual

Some key questions

- **What drives increasing EGM consumption?**
- **Do current arrangements provide any *balance* between enjoyment of EGM consumption and its social harms?**
- **Can this be achieved?**
- **How might the EGM technical system be re-focused on protection?**

'Business as usual'

- **Only a small proportion of gamblers suffer harmful consequences from EGM gambling**
- **Current EGM arrangements are safe: gamblers are the problem**
- **Current EGM arrangements should not be altered as this will reduce the enjoyment of those who are not troubled**
- **The worlds of EGM gamblers are well understood and their voices are heard in the framing of policy and regulation**

So who's at fault?

- **Flawed consumers!**
- **Problem gambling is viewed (particularly by industry and government) as an individual pathology**
- **Chris Berg, IPA ... May 2009, *The Age***
 - 'Ninety-eight per cent of people who play the slots suffer no negative consequences'
- **So the ones who do are aberrations**

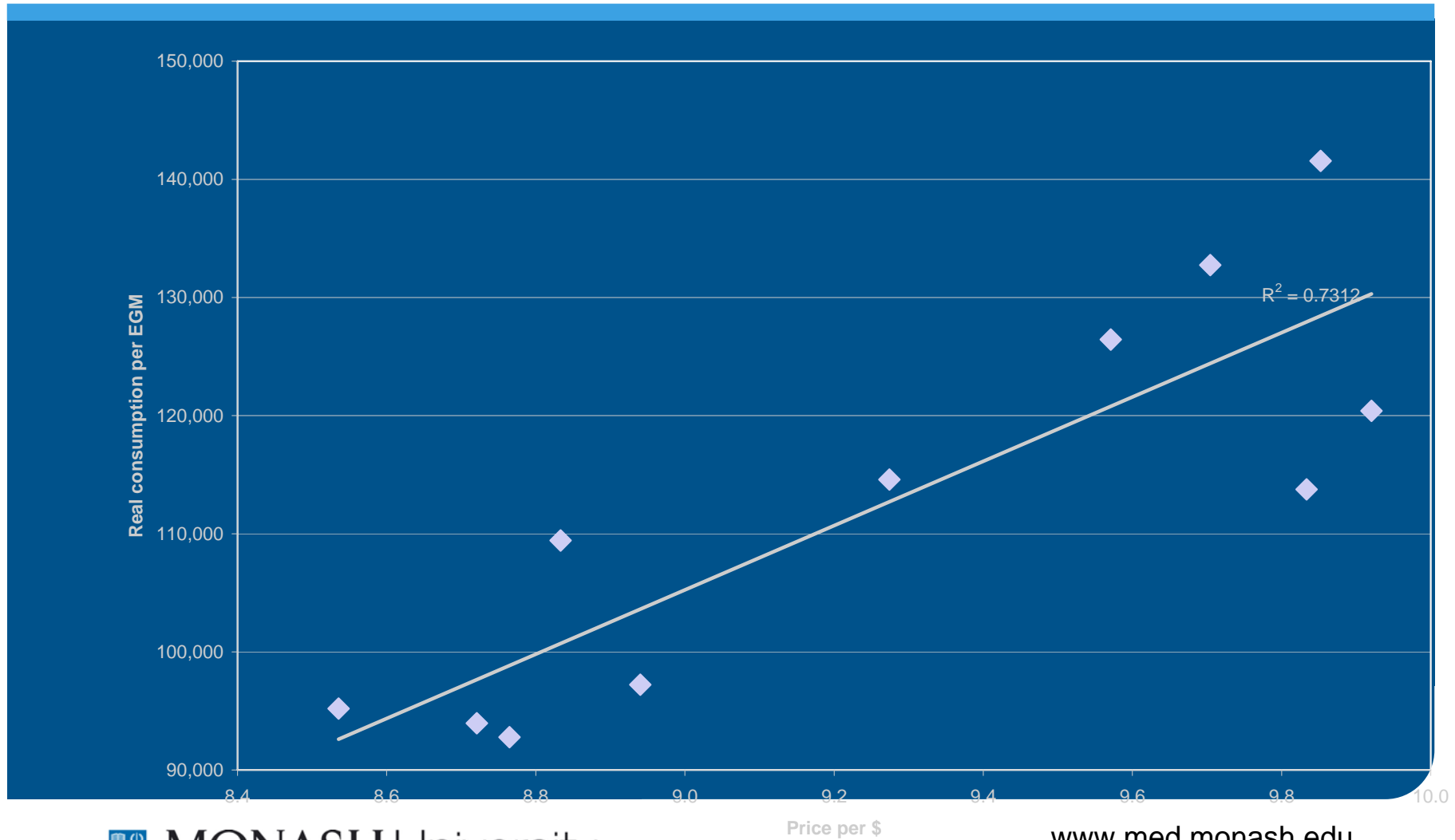
Which means ...

- **Governments are keen to acknowledge that they care**
- **But not to interrupt the flow of funds ...**
- **So the individual pathology approach is very attractive**
- **Fund counselling services, warning signs, and marginalia**
- **But DO NOT interrupt the flow of cash**

Within Maribyrnong

- **Average EGM performance (2007-08) - Footscray:**
 - Court House Hotel: \$230,833 per EGM p.a.
 - Average: \$113,700 per EGM p.a.
- **Across Victoria (2008-09)**
 - Total NGR \$2.7 billion, or \$101,123 per EGM p.a.

RTP vs. real EGM consumption Vic, 1994-2004



Gambling related harm

- **Includes:**
 - Financial (average EGM-PG thought to spend \$12,000+ pa)
 - Emotional (relationships, divorce, alienation, shame, guilt)
 - Criminal & other legal
 - Physical
 - Self-harm, incl. suicide
 - Lost productivity and opportunity costs

Harm minimisation

- **Are we in fact committed to the minimisation of harm?**
- **Current regime does not represent good practice:**
 - Ignores data (including non-system evidence)
 - Is not goal focused
 - Is not systematically evaluated
 - Lacks needed technical expertise

How much do problem gamblers spend?

(source: Caraniche 2005)

Category	N	%	Visits per week	\$ per visit	Weekly spend	Total weekly spend	% of weekly spend
Non-problem	130	31.1%	1.98	\$35.85	\$71	\$9,228	9.7%
Low risk	69	16.5%	2.13	\$56.52	\$120	\$8,307	8.7%
Moderate risk	106	25.4%	3.35	\$76.32	\$256	\$27,101	28.4%
Problem	113	27.0%	4.34	\$103.41	\$449	\$50,714	53.2%

Another estimate ...

- **PC (1999) estimated problem gamblers spent about 42% of EGM consumption**
- **Somewhere around half the people in gaming rooms are likely to be in trouble with their gambling**
- **Can we sustain an argument about the small minority?**
- **Can we sustain an argument about not inconveniencing 'recreational' gamblers?**

So ...

- Somewhere around half the EGM spend comes from problem gamblers
- Somewhere around half the people in gaming rooms are likely to be in trouble with their gambling
- Can we sustain an argument about the small minority?
- Can we sustain an argument about not inconveniencing 'recreational' gamblers?

Public health ...

- **‘Public health’ has been appropriated by many regulators**
- **The version most used in gambling is about ‘rescuing’ people – with some behaviour change and community education**
- **But it does not address the system’s characteristics – particularly the interface and the data issues**
- **We are preoccupied with downstream ‘solutions’**

How to go upstream ...

- **We must be driven by the evidence; which is accessible via the EGM system**
- **We would have regard to principles of consumer protection**
- **In other words – make sure the devices are safe to use, and very unlikely to inflict harm on those using them**
- **After all, this is supposed to be harmless fun**

A consumer protection system?

- **Means:**

- Probably reduced volatility, which would flow from lower prizes and lower stakes (do we need \$10, or even \$5, bets per spin?)
- Certainly spend time and effort on game maths
- Constrain marketing technologies
- Consider smart card system wide pre-commitment

Pre-commitment, etc

- **Effective pre-commitment needs a system wide network – which already exists**
- **Also needs a secure card or other device to ‘authorise’ play**
- **Would make self exclusion effective (for the first time)**
- **If well instituted would also assist many gamblers trying to manage their use**

BUT ...

- **Pre-commitment won't help everyone**
- **EGM technology can be modified to reduce the most extreme harmful consequences**
- **Whether this may result in EGMs that are less fun is an open question – the Brits don't think so**
- **Almost no other jurisdiction in the world does what we do**

NSW

- **Is a key to the resolution of EGM derived problem gambling**
- **The pokies are metastasised into the fabric of NSW society**
- **Harm production is industrialised and politically powerful**
- **As we see from the submissions to the PC ...**

'Activism' and public health research

- **Gambling research has a history of industry involvement – including NAGS:**
 - conferences at casinos, industry board members, industry sponsorship
 - Is this ethically or academically sustainable?
- **'Activism not research' – the old guard response to critique**
- **But disruption of the discourse of business as usual is necessary**

Normalisation – de-normalisation

- **Normalisation as the process of instituting orthodoxy, an attempt to put a concept or institutional arrangements beyond question**
- **De-normalisation as the heterodox ‘attack’ on orthodoxy**
- **But orthodoxy generally survives by modification, appropriating heterodoxy**
- **And *doxa* - ‘common sense’ are the waters through which this reflexive dialectic swims**
 - a misrecognition of what is *culturally given* for what is *naturally given* – e.g.; *women give birth but it is not ‘natural’ for them to be therefore discriminated against*

Finally

- **A sustainable, ethically defensible EGM industry (including a research industry) may be achievable**
- **It needs technological and social solutions, esp. in NSW**
- **These can't be delivered via the discourse of business as usual**
- **Consumer protection and resistance to vested interests are critical elements, amongst many!**