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letter to the editor

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In “Conceptual challenges from pathological gambling” (*Journal of Gambling Issues*, Issue 14, September 2005), Nigel Turner wrote, “I have heard some people try to explain machine gambling as a process of hypnotism caused by the spinning reels of a machine. But such an explanation does not account for addictions to betting on horses, dice, or poker or other card games, where there are no spinning reels to speak of.”

While I agree that the theory explaining addiction to gambling in terms of the hypnotic trance state that occurs as a consequence of gaming machine play does *not* account for people's addiction to betting on horses, dice, or poker or other card games, I have to challenge the notion that the part the hypnotic process plays in gaming machine addiction is not worthy of further exploration. We may find through further exploration that the hypnosis that players experience may very well explain both the cause and the harmful effect of people's addiction to gaming machines.

What I see as a fundamental flaw in research into gambling addiction these days is that very few researchers give any credence to the notion that the addiction-causing property that affects those who are addicted to gaming machines may not be the same property found to cause addiction to other forms of gambling, e.g., betting on horses or dice or even playing card games.

What I propose is that while the reward or reinforcement might be the same in all instances of gambling (i.e., the gaining of money), the addiction-causing property (i.e., what the gambler gets out of the activity) is not the same for all forms of gambling.

Consider for a moment the idea that the addictive in machine gambling *is* the trance state and the addictive in betting on horses is something else—the action or the win, for example. What if gaming machine addiction is as different from betting on horses, dice, poker, etc., as smoking cocaine is different from smoking

cigarettes?

If this proposal is correct, then *discounting theories about the hypnotic effect of machine gambling as invalid because they do not explain gambling on card games, is about as nonsensical as saying that because the effect nicotine has on the human brain cannot account for people's addiction to smoking cocaine (or vice versa), nicotine should not be considered the addictive property in smoking.*

While both smoking cigarettes and smoking cocaine involve the act of lighting a “cigarette,” inhaling air through the “cigarette,” and exhaling smoke, the ways the inhaled substances affect the chemistry of the brain are known to be different. Further, knowledge of the different effects the inhaled substances have on the psychobiology of people who inhale them ensures that the smoking of tobacco cigarettes and the smoking of cocaine are treated as two separate addictions—not as one—and that treatment in each case is tailored so that both those addicted to smoking cocaine and those addicted to smoking tobacco cigarettes have the best chance of quitting.

While gambling on horses and gambling on a gaming machine both involve gambling—the risking of money on a single event that has an uncertain outcome—and they both involve a contract between two parties (the punter and the house) in which one party predicts that the event being bet on will turn out one way and the other party predicts that the event will turn out a different way, I believe that what affects *and causes changes* to the psychobiology of the punter who bets on gaming machines may very well be the hypnotic effect the spinning of the reels has, while what affects and causes changes to the psychobiology of punters who bet on horses, dice, poker, etc., will prove to be something entirely different. The addictive in each case may in fact be different enough for addiction to gaming machines and addiction to horses, cards, dice, etc., to be considered two different addictions. Simply, addictions that outwardly appear the same and have the same effect on the addict's finances are otherwise as different as chalk and cheese.

Finally, as prescribing nicotine patches won't help a cocaine sufferer's withdrawal symptoms and administering Naloxone won't reverse the effects of inhaled nicotine, perhaps treatments for gambling addicts and gaming machine addicts need to be tailored to the gambler's specific addiction. Unfortunately, that won't happen while researchers and therapists alike continue to perceive that

- all gambling is the same,
- the “act” of gambling is the “addictive,” and
- at least one common causative agent of gambling addiction has to explain *all* pathological gambling regardless of the differences between the various gambling products.

I, for one, would like to see addiction to gambling and addiction to gaming machines separated in both research and treatment. In fact, I would like to see dissimilar forms of gambling researched and treated as if they were separate addictions.

Perhaps this way, researchers might stop discounting as irrelevant the factors that gaming machine addicts keep reporting as significant in the creation of their addiction, clinicians might better understand what needs to be treated and what doesn't in each instance, service delivery and outcomes for those who seek assistance over their gambling might improve, and my need to write letters to all and sundry may dissipate.

References

Turner, N.. (2005). Conceptual challenges from pathological gambling. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 14. Retrieved January 20, 2006, from http://www.camh.net/egambling/issue14/jgi_14_intro.html