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**Gambling treatment: free, confidential and it works**

This guest opinion is by Jeff Marotta, Ph.D., problem gambling services manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services.

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By Jeffrey Marotta

You may have seen the 30-second television ad. It opens with scenes of women in a beauty shop, smelling flowers at a nursery, and delivering mail in the office.

"It had gotten to the point where I didn't know who I was anymore," says a collage of female voices. "At first it was fun, gambling distracted me from my problems, helped me feel better. But after a while I felt nothing, felt ashamed...."

It's a soft-sell pitch about a surprising challenge: More than half of Oregon's problem gamblers are women, compared with about a third nationally. Yet the number of Oregon women enrolling in treatment is below 50 percent and has leveled off.

The new TV ad, which will be complemented by print and point-of-sale messages, was paid for by the Oregon Lottery and encourages these women to seek free, Oregon Lottery-financed treatment by calling the helpline: 1-877-2-STOP-NOW.

Statewide, about 80 percent of adult Oregonians gamble while the proportion of the population that gambles weekly is about 13 percent. Of these frequent gamblers, about one in six have trouble with their gambling.

To get a picture of that, imagine that you are sitting in Autzen Stadium with 50,000 Oregonians who gamble at least once a week. Assuming they were representative of Oregon's population of frequent gamblers, the entire bleacher section would be filled with over 8,000 problem gamblers.

Why do women constitute more than half of Oregon's problem gamblers? Just look at Oregon's gambling marketplace for the answer. The big money makers for gambling operators are video poker and electronic slots, games for which female problem gamblers have an affinity. Many of these machines are located in establishments that cater to women including sandwich shops, bowling alleys, pizza parlors, taverns, and casinos.

These places offer gambling experiences that are perceived as convenient, clean, hospitable, and safe. However, playing slots and video poker is hardly a safe activity. Researchers have noted that as many as one in 28 players develop problems from these games.

Last year, 662 of them enrolled in treatment. Fifty-six percent reported problems with their marriage or other significant relationship; 39 percent had committed illegal acts; 25 percent had job problems; and 12 percent experienced suicidal thoughts.

One of Lane County's gambling counselors who works with women problem gamblers put it well. "They say they want to die," she said. "What they're really saying is, 'I want to be happy.'"

About 4,000 calls a year are placed by both women and men to the 24-hour problem gambling helpline in Springfield, where a counselor can use three-way calling to connect the caller to a treatment provider anywhere in the state.

Oregon has one of the nation's best treatment networks, and the Oregon Lottery devotes 10 percent of its marketing budget to treatment advertising. Besides conventional treatment, we offer a home-based program that is attractive to seniors and to people living in rural areas. We also have problem gambling residential programs in Columbia and Josephine counties.

Research shows that 79 percent of those who enroll in treatment are gambling significantly less or not at all six months later.

As the voiceover says at the conclusion of the 30-second ad, "Treatment is free, confidential and it works."

*Jeffrey Marotta, Ph.D., is problem gambling services manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services.*