

Gambling in a Remote Aboriginal Setting – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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The Ceduna township on the far west coast of South Australia is home to 732 Aboriginal people, comprising 21.3% of the local population¹. Ceduna acts as regional centre for other Indigenous communities, such as Koonibba and several smaller homeland communities, as well as the more distant desert communities of Yalata, Oak Valley and Maralinga. Most of the Aboriginal residents are from the Wirangu, Kokotha and Mirning tribal groups.

Collaboration

In 2009 the Ceduna Koonibba Aboriginal Health Service (CKAHS), an Indigenous-specific service, and Statewide Gambling Therapy Service (SGTS) joined together to investigate the impact that gambling was having on the Aboriginal people living in this region. Both organisations were funded through the state-based Office for Problem Gambling to provide gambling intervention.

CKAHS was aware of widespread gambling within the communities they were working with and was concerned that gambling was having an increasingly negative impact on the welfare of families. With the funding they were able to appoint an Indigenous Gambling Intervention Officer; the person appointed is widely respected within and across the Aboriginal groups in this region.

SGTS had 10 years of experience in providing treatment to problem gamblers across South Australia, operating out of Flinders Medical Centre, a major teaching hospital. At the time that the project commenced SGTS was providing therapy to problem gamblers from three sites within the Adelaide metropolitan area and another eight rural centres². Flinders University, in conjunction with the hospital, had recently appointed a Project Officer to promote the service specifically with Indigenous groups and investigate better ways of working with clients of Indigenous background. The person appointed was non-Indigenous but had experience at working cross-

The good	The bad	The ugly
Winning on the Melbourne Cup	Losing big time	Losing son and daughter through gambling
Hearing about other winners – thinking you can do the same	Broken relationship	Losing everything through gambling, is heart breaking and ugly for anyone to have destroyed
Adrenalin rush – the thought of winning	Feeling bad and sad	Losing money to gambling
Feeling good when winning	Feeling sad and lonely	No food
Meeting up with others	Looking for money for food, for children	No clothes
Enjoying a drink and playing	Children sitting with no food, crying	Losing your family
	Feeling angry	Losing your job
	Tongue hanging out	Losing your mortgage/car/furniture
		Losing loved ones, breaking marriages, not seeing your kids
		Losing your best friend
		Losing your self-esteem and respect
		Losing my daughter

Table 1. Attitudes to gambling

culturally and in the delivery of community treatment programs.

CKAHS and Statewide decided to work in partnership to develop a community approach to gambling in Ceduna, sharing their expertise and knowledge of gambling and cultural issues. Ethics approval had already been granted for the SGTS Longitudinal Study by the Flinders Clinical Research Ethics Committee. Further approval was sought from the Aboriginal Research Ethics Committee and was granted.

Consultation with Indigenous Workers

Gambling was a highly visible activity with Indigenous people living in the area and workers were aware of stories of harm attributed to gambling within the community. Early conversations held by the Project Officers with Indigenous workers and residents in Ceduna revealed that gambling was not often viewed as a health issue though and there appeared to be a stigma associated with seeking help for gambling specifically. Workers also expressed reluctance to ask clients about their gambling or its possible impact.

Asking the Community

During the course of a week 52 Indigenous people were requested to complete a brief, open-ended style of interview about gambling, with 50 consenting to be interviewed. The interview covered their own experiences with gambling, both positive and negative perceptions of gambling and the impact of themselves, their family and community. Thirty-five (70%) of those interviewed were female, skewed by the predominantly female contingent within the Indigenous work force in the region. The findings of this survey are being prepared for publication but the overwhelming message was that the majority of those interviewed gambled regularly, and viewed gambling as an issue in their own lives or amongst those they were close to. Particularly since the introduction of gaming machines into local hotel venues it was clear that those surveyed saw gambling as a larger issue than it had been previously and associated gambling with hurting families, children in particular.

Following in the Footsteps of Others

In 2006 an Indigenous worker from an organisation also sponsored by the Office of Problem Gambling, had worked with a small group of Indigenous women in Ceduna to produce artwork creating a health promotion poster on problem gambling. The SGTS Project Officer re-met with these women and invited them to attend another art workshop, with the theme being "Gambling: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly". This approach, based on the Motivational Interviewing technique of raising both the positive and negative aspects of behaviour³ had already proven effective when engaging Aboriginal people in a discussion about gambling at other community forums.

In all 15 women attended the workshop, where lunch and art



Figure 1. Some alternatives to gambling – this poster was produced by the Koonibba community.

materials were provided. Initially the Project Officer encouraged women to share their likes and dislikes of gambling and their responses are shown in Table 1 (opposite). Further discussion about gambling was generated by this activity, with the Project Officer able to share some of her experiences at working with Indigenous people who wished to address their gambling.

It quickly became apparent from the conversations that most of the women attending the workshop gambled regularly and many struggled to control their gambling, reporting gambling as impacting on their self-esteem and their ability to care for their families. It was also clear from the discussions that gambling was not the sole problem they faced but its impact was significant and gambling was inter-related with other issues they were contending with in their daily lives.

Imagine a World Without Problem Gambling

This theme was suggested as the basis for the artwork. The women proved receptive to the positive spin in creating a message about gambling for their community. On the day they created a series of paintings to be used as flags at community health events. The flags have made their community appearances

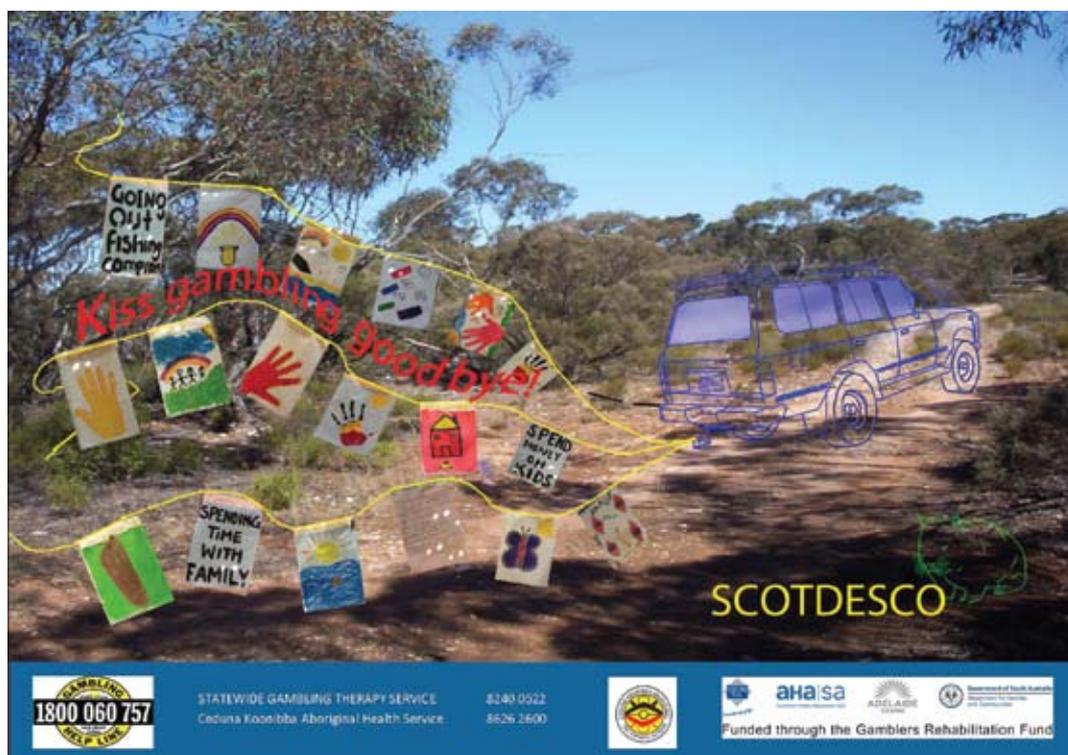


Figure 2. The ScotDesco community's Kiss Gambling Goodbye poster, produced with artist/arranger, Joshua Bertossa.

several times since this workshop but were also used to make a poster to be shared by the group participants. The poster has been produced at low-budget and with the group's permission it is now featured in windows of services throughout the region, including the local gaming venues. The poster is shown on the back cover of this issue of the *Journal*.

The Second Poster: Messages from the Kids

Two days of community activities were planned by the Project Officers to run in Gambling Awareness Week in 2009, with a focus on reaching school-aged children and their families with healthy messages around gambling. As part of these activities school children from Koonibba, a largely Indigenous community, completed a series of questions about gambling, including finding entertainment alternatives to gambling. Their responses were collated and combined with photos, forming the basis of a further community poster. The Indigenous Gambling Officer returned to their school at a later date, and each of the children was presented with their personal copy of the poster to take home. These posters, like the first one, are also regularly featured in windows around the communities. Their poster is depicted in Figure 1 on the previous page.

The Third Poster: Kiss Gambling Goodbye

Not to be outdone, the ScotDesco community held a lunch-time workshop, which was arranged after a series of earlier visits by the Project Officers. ScotDesco is a relatively independent homeland community based 100km north of Ceduna. The families survive on income generated through their sheep, wheat and barley, CDEP and other grants and a recently established a café and art centre.

This community is highly regarded by other Aboriginal groups in the region for their autonomy and self-management. However some of ScotDesco's residents had spoken to the Project Officers about experiencing problems with gambling when they came into town. It would seem that shopping and

paying bills did not always take precedence over money for gambling, with some families bearing the negative consequences of excessive gambling.

The poster that arose through this lunch-time discussion was once again a budget effort, based on the flags produced by both men and women living at this homeland. The high regard in which this community is held by others has the potential to send a powerful message across other Aboriginal groups in the region. Their poster is shown in Figure 2 at left.

Where to From Here?

There are a number of signs that indicate the community development approach has proven effective. Towards

the end of the first year of the project six people have signed up for one-on-one therapy to address gambling; a small group of women are meeting regularly to learn more about how to overcome gambling and provide support to each other; some of the men have started to complain to the Project Officers that they don't have their own similar forum, a wish that the Officers are only too happy to provide support around. In general, there has been a notable improvement in the level of engagement with the program amongst health and welfare workers in the town, with the Project Officers regularly meeting with staff across agencies.

What Worked?

Besides the community workshops, the Indigenous Project Officer met regularly and extensively with community groups, introducing his role and that of the other Project Officer, as a gambling therapist. The posters were not the only vehicle used to promote the concept of problem gambling as a health issue with the community but they have certainly been an important and valuable entry point to raising the profile of problem gambling as a serious and significant health issue to be contended with by these communities.

Acknowledgements

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References

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