



GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

A Report on the Institute's 9th Annual Conference on Gambling Research: *Emergent Clinical Issues in Problem Gambling*—April 2010

As has become tradition, the Institute's annual conference was hosted by The Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta from April 8th to 10th, 2010. The Centre's first-class facilities and awe-inspiring mountain location were enjoyed by all despite the rather sudden arrival of a spring snowstorm. Conference organizers, Dr. David Hodgins and Ms. Vicki Williams, arranged a diverse and distinguished group of experts to present research findings to the 80+ people in attendance. In addition to traditional plenary sessions, this year's event introduced a number of exciting modifications to the conference's format. These included a pre-conference symposium on women's problem gambling, concurrent sessions featuring longitudinal studies and invited participant papers, a debate on how gambling problems are conceptualized, and a banquet to celebrate the Institute's 10th anniversary.

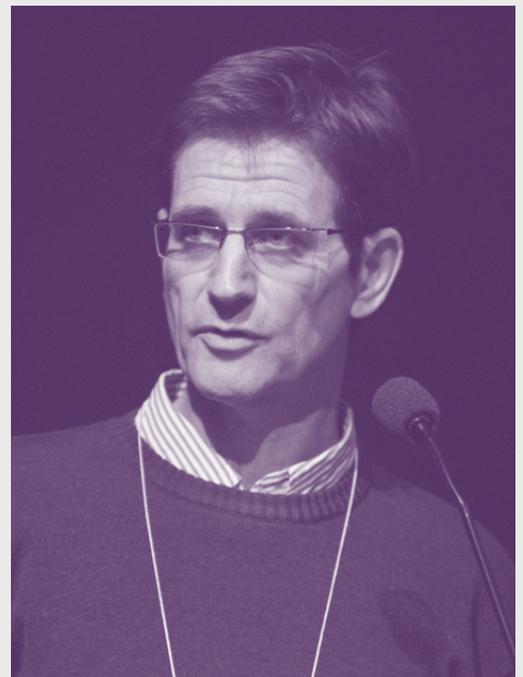
The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.*

OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

The South Australian Statewide Gambling Therapy Service: Exposure as the Model of Therapy

Prior to discussing his exposure model of therapy for problem gamblers, Dr. Malcolm Battersby of Flinders University provided background about the gambling environment in his home city of Adelaide, South Australia. Adelaide is by far the state's largest and most populous city and home to one major casino and hundreds of smaller electronic gaming machine (EGM) venues. Taxation of gaming machine revenue generates roughly \$300-million for the state government's coffers and studies indicate that about 2-3% of the population is affected by problem gambling.



Dr. Malcolm Battersby



Ms. Sally Gainsbury (nee Monaghan)

The two main types of online treatments identified by Gainsbury from her review were Internet therapies and online interventions.

The exposure treatment model used at the South Australian Gambling Therapy Service is based on an anxiety disorder principal. The model itself has developed and been continually refined over the past fourteen years. Battersby explained that it seeks to identify internal and external “triggers” (e.g., money, bills) that lead to gambling arousal (e.g., excitement, increase in heart rate, sweating) and then to actual gambling activity. Once a problem gambler’s triggers are identified, the goal of the treatment program is to “de-link” and extinguish the gambling urge using repeated reinforcement techniques. Exposure treatment itself is “graded” for problem gamblers and begins mildly (e.g., showing the gambler a picture of a gaming machine) and then gradually progresses to real-world scenarios involving, for example, taking the gambler inside a gambling venue with a small amount of money.

Since its inception as a statewide service in 2007, the program has grown to the point where it is now treating about 500 people per year. The clients served have been predominantly people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have often had a gambling problem for five years or more. Self-rated outcomes from individuals who took part in therapy show significant reductions in overall levels of gambling and declines in both urges to gamble and comorbid behaviour. A formal evaluation of outcomes was also undertaken with 127 persons who had received treatment. Individuals retained in treatment (60% of whom completed six months or more) showed much better outcomes than those who dropped out. One unexpected finding from the study was that people regularly reported *cognitive* changes in how they perceive gambling despite not having any formal cognitive therapy.

In concluding, Battersby recognized that, “It could be seen as counterintuitive to bring someone up to a gaming machine and have them sit in front of it with credits on the machine and then not gamble.” Despite his concern that the exposure-based model of problem gambling treatment is unpopular with those who equate it to taunting the devil, his experience leads him to believe that, “The urge to gamble is actually increased by [gambling] avoidance and that, over time, the urge to gamble can be lowered with exposure treatment.”

Conference presentations are available from <http://dspace.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/47796>

Internet-based Treatment for Problem Gamblers

Internet-based treatment for problem gambling was the focus of two separate presentations at this year’s conference. Ms. Sally Gainsbury (nee Monaghan) of Southern Cross University presented an informative overview of existing evidence and models while Mr. Thomas Nilsson from Sweden’s Spelinstitutet described lessons learned over the five years his centre has offered online treatment options.

The two main types of online treatments identified by Gainsbury from her review were Internet therapies and online interventions. Internet therapies (e.g., GamAid, Finland’s Addiction Link) incorporate techniques that use the Internet as a medium to offer therapy. Examples of specific treatment resources included on these types of website are self-paced treatment materials, access to trained therapists, and exercises that incorporate automated-response feedback. Contact with therapists happens via email, telephone, discussion forum, video conferencing, or through some combination of the above. Gainsbury pointed out that there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that Internet therapies are effective in treating substance-related problems like smoking and alcohol abuse.



Thomas Nilsson

Nilsson adapted his self-help program for the Internet after being inspired by positive research results from studies on Internet treatment that were undertaken by Dr. Per Carlbring at Swenden's Linköping University.

Online interventions (e.g., Know the Score, CheckYourGambling.net) are also becoming increasingly available for the treatment of problem gambling. They differ from Internet therapies in that the focus is on "self-help." Website visitors are normally offered a choice of identifying themselves through registration or anonymous participation. Once questions relevant to a person's gambling behaviour are answered, clients receive an automated report that provides an indicator of where they "fit" in comparison to the population as a whole. Oftentimes, website users are also provided with normative feedback, content tailored to their personal situation, and a suite of tools and educative exercises based upon their earlier responses. "When someone enters a treatment program, it is important that they be directed to the *right* place for them which makes tailoring helpful in keeping people on a program," said Gainsbury. She noted that online interventions now do this automatically by making use of computer algorithms which also makes them an effective adjunct to treatment.

In his presentation, Thomas Nilsson described Spelinstitutet's problem gambling treatment program which combines elements of both Internet therapy and an online intervention. The program originated through Nilsson's interest in creating a self-help book for problem gamblers based on motivational interviewing techniques and self-help manuals (e.g., *Becoming a Winner* manual by David Hodgins & Karyn Makarchuk). Nilsson adapted his self-help program for the Internet after being inspired by positive research results from studies on Internet treatment that were undertaken by Dr. Per Carlbring at Swenden's Linköping University.

Swedes in Sweden and living abroad interested in receiving assistance from the Spelinstitutet website are directed to it through online advertisements, referrals from the Swedish gambling help telephone line, and links from Internet gambling sites. Once there, visitors are screened using 115 questions to determine if treatment is suitable for them. Nilsson indicated that, though the number of questions appears onerous, he has found that, "When people are motivated to seeking help they don't have a problem going through the screening instruments." If people decide to then pursue treatment, they are offered a program of eight weekly modules delivered online with available telephone support. The first and longest module involves a 40-60 minute telephone session with a clinician to develop alternative strategies for life goals. At this time, a client also determines if his/her personal goal involves reducing gambling or abstaining altogether. Results of treatment have been promising as clients completing the program show significantly reduced scores on all gambling screening measures.

In her summary of future directions for Internet-based problem gambling treatment, Gainsbury reported that there are implementation issues that still need to be resolved in order to enhance outcomes. Examples of these issues include an understanding that online treatment is unsuitable for some individuals, potential clients are often unaware that this form of treatment exists, and that treatment attrition remains a stumbling block. Likewise, Nilsson touched upon similar implementation challenges when talking about his program and also discussed how they were addressed. Both Gainsbury and Nilsson stated that individuals now have an expectation that treatment services will be offered online and that many actually prefer that option. They also cautioned that, while online programs are not for everyone, they are certainly effective for individuals who might not otherwise seek help or who are unable to access in-person treatment.

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**Banquet Recognizes Institute's
Decade of Achievement**

Banquet participants were treated to a series of brief speeches highlighting the Institute's major achievements over the first decade of its existence. Board Chair Dr. Nady el-Guebaly recognized Mrs. Sheila Murphy for her dedication to the Institute Board and then introduced Mr. Gerry McLennan, CEO of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) Mr. McLennan acknowledged the contribution of the Institute's research to his organization's work and affirmed his full support for a continuing partnership.



Dr. Garry Smith

The final speaker at the banquet was longtime gambling research pioneer Dr. Garry Smith of the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension. Dr. Smith explained the genesis of the Institute and detailed the involvement of certain foundational individuals whose behind-the-scenes work resulted in its formation. He also discussed several key individuals affiliated with the Alberta Gaming Research Institute and recognized their unique characteristics and attributes which he felt were pivotal in contributing to the Institute's overall record of research success.

Pre-conference Symposium: Understanding Women Problem Gamblers

On Thursday, April 8th, one day prior to the start of the main conference, a group of approximately 25 people were involved in a symposium entitled *Behind the Mask: Understanding Women Problem Gamblers*. This event was organized by Dr. Noëlla Piquette-Tomei of the University of Lethbridge and brought together researchers, practitioners, and students to discuss the clinical issues regarding women problem gamblers.

The symposium morning session featured presentations by Dr. Piquette-Tomei "Female problem gamblers: Context and considerations", Dr. Rob Williams "Characteristics of Canadian female gamblers: A comparative overview", Dr. David Hodgins "A Brief Introduction to Gambling Interventions", Mr. Rhys Stevens "Strategifor locating research resources related to problem gambling" and Dr. Matt Tata "In search of the neural correlates of gambling: Evidence from human neuroimaging". In the afternoon, participants broke into small groups to facilitate future planning and potential research partnership opportunities.

**Award Recipients for Best Oral
Presentation and Poster**

This year there was an award presented for both the best participant paper oral presentation as well as for best research poster. Congratulations to Ph.D. Student Ms. Terri-Lynn MacKay from the University of Calgary who presented her paper entitled "Cognitive Distortions as a Major Risk Factor in Online Gambling" as well as Dr. Jennifer Buckle from Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland for her poster entitled "Personality factors associated with gambling behaviour in university students."



Terri-Lynn MacKay receives award.