

OPEN LETTER TO NSW MPS 20200529

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Friday 29 May 2020

To: The Premier Gladys Berejiklian
Minister for Health Brad Hazzard
Minister for Customer Services (and Gambling) Victor Dominello
Treasurer Dominic Perrottet

cc: Leader of the Opposition Jodi McKay
Shadow Minister for Health Ryan Park
Shadow Minister for Customer Services (and Gambling) Sophie Cotsis
Greens spokesperson for Gambling Cate Faehrmann
Emma Hurst (Animal Justice Party)
Mark Banasiak (Shooters Farmers and Fishers)
Rev Fred Nile (Christian Democratic Party)
Justin Field (Independent)
Mark Latham (Pauline Hanson's One Nation)

Re: Did the NSW CHO have all necessary information to restart poker machines?

Dear Premier, Ministers, Leader of the Opposition, Shadows and MPs,

Firstly, congratulations on the difficult and important work you are doing to keep the residents of NSW safe during this time of crisis.

I am writing to you now because the stages by which NSW is reopening its community and economic activity are crucial and should be solely decided by the government in consultation with public health officials. It should not be dictated to by industry interests.

I wrote in early April to all Premiers and Chief Ministers, after the ACT government showed leadership and innovative thinking by linking the provision of financial assistance to community clubs' employees, with ongoing reduction in gambling impacts - in their case, through an EGM buyback scheme. We urged each state to use this disruption to rethink the damage and cost of the gambling industry, and the opportunity to invest in more productive sectors in arts and hospitality in order to build back a stronger and more resilient society.

Sadly, it appears that plea has fallen on deaf ears in NSW. In fact, it looks likely to be worse off. Based on today's news reports, it seems ClubsNSW is dictating the speed and extent of reopening gambling rooms in clubs and pubs. Rather than being the last thing turned back on, as recommended by the Prime Minister and Chief Medical Officer, poker machines are some of the first activities to reopen in the state.

It is simply not true that poker machine revenue is essential for a club or pub to reopen. No stand-alone restaurant in NSW has a poker machine. Many gambling-free venues are trying to reopen. There are no pub or club poker machines in WA. In fact in allowing this to occur, the State Government is significantly disadvantaging local restaurants and venues without gambling revenue to underwrite staffing and business costs.

What is true is that the most vulnerable members of our community will be exposed to unnecessary risk on Monday, because the government did not put the public interest first.

I find it unconscionable that the reopening of an unessential service like gambling is even being conceived of when we are very much still in the midst of this crisis. How, when looking at the evidence, can this truly be the independent advice of public health experts?

We know people experiencing social isolation are more vulnerable to gambling harm. We also know many poker machine users are physically more vulnerable to the transmission of COVID-19. Vulnerabilities which may increase transmission of, and risk from, COVID-19 include:

- Age – poker machine users are substantially over-represented among those aged 50 and older and people who identified as Indigenous
- Comorbid conditions – poker machine users are significantly more likely to be smokers, and more likely to have lung conditions including asthma and to be obese.
- Hygiene – clinical indicators tell us that people with gambling addictions experience poorer hygiene, may sweat a lot and cry, compulsively rub machines and play more than one machine at a time. Some of these behaviours may be outside of the control of individuals so normal hygiene measures which might be adequate in other settings may not be effective

As outlined above, poker machine rooms are high touch environments with vulnerable community members and may therefore be a high risk environment for community transmission.

To this end, we seek answers to the following questions:

- Were the above mentioned vulnerabilities brought to the attention of the Chief Health Officer when she considered plans for the reopening of gambling rooms?
- Who will be responsible for enforcement of hygiene and social distancing measures in gambling rooms - independent monitors, or managers seeking to recoup lost revenue?
- Will these rooms be treated differently to food service areas in venues?

The Chief Health Officer, naturally, could not have been expected to also consider other social and personal harms arising from reopening gambling rooms at this stage of our response to COVID-19. We have repeatedly written to you about the links between

gambling and poor mental health, domestic and family violence, financial stress and homelessness. You know that last year, \$18 million a day, every day, was lost on poker machines in clubs and pubs in NSW.

Because you did not clearly set out a plan to delay gambling room reopening until the end of the pandemic, and to reorganise the industry to prioritise employment through entertainment and hospitality rather than gambling, we are in this situation.

What will you do to minimise the harm?

Yours sincerely

Rev Tim Costello

Chief Advocate, Alliance for Gambling Reform