

MY OPINION OF THE LATEST PREVALENCE STUDY IN QUEBEC

Once again the government of Quebec has done a prevalence study based on a total population and come up with all kinds of erroneous “good news”, as only Robert Ladouceur of Laval University’s Centre for Gambling Treatment and Prevention can do. What is more, they claim the taxpayers got some bang for their buck with the survey, given that the study of a billion-dollar operation run by the state only cost \$175 000. The English language media apparently did not notice the headlines of *Le Devoir* on the 10th and 11th of April 2004 that read, “The (social) cost of gambling (to the government) in Quebec is \$2.5 billion per year.” This figure represents almost two dollars in costs for every dollar of net profit. This of course is providing the number of pathological gamblers in Quebec is 140 000, or 2% of the entire population of Quebec. The figure of 2% pathological and 3% problematic has always been generally accepted, although studies done in other jurisdictions (and even a study done in Montreal) based strictly on people who gamble on machines yielded significantly higher figures. The study showed that among that group 9% tested pathological, 21% problematic and 42% at risk. (*Quebec Institute of Public Health, April, 2001*) At that time in Montreal alone, without counting the rest of the province or other types of gamblers, they counted 13 000 pathological gamblers, 29 000 problematic and 58 000 at risk for a total of 100 000. Now we are being told that in the province of Quebec, for all types of gambling “the pool of addicted gamblers could number as high as 56 000 Quebecers, while as many as 62 000 could be “at risk” -- possibly on their way to joining those floundering in pool No. 1.” This in direct contrast to the fact that Video Lottery revenues have increased every year. Suddenly, the problematic category no longer exists. One is either pathological or at risk. The study found 81% of Quebecers gambled at least once a year, gambling in this case defined as anything from playing the lottery, playing cards with friends or going to Bingo. That number is down from the 90% researchers tallied in 1996. Researchers speculate this decrease could be attributed to increased media scrutiny on the dangers of pathological gambling or to would-be players simply disappointed with the casino experience who walked away. I have my own theory which is backed up by the record numbers of bankruptcies, non-violent crimes, and suicides that speculates fewer people are gambling because they have run out of sources of revenue.

Perhaps journalists who absorb these studies and report on them as being Gospel ought to spend one day at a treatment centre speaking to some of the victims. Dr. Ladouceur describes the typical pathological gambler as a single male who didn't go further than high school, now earning less than \$40 000 per year. In reality, you would be amazed to know the occupations and salaries earned by those in treatment. The article in the *Montreal Gazette* on April 14, 2004 referred to them as "Quebecers who were born to lose". Perhaps if the journalist had done some inquiries of those whose opinions are unbiased, he may have learned that VLTs are the one form of gambling not requiring predisposition to become addictive. There are studies that prove that the pathology emanates from the machine to the player, not vice versa. Maybe knowing that, the journalist might not have run a caption that said "Video lottery terminals is the game of choice". Our clients do not choose to lose their families, their jobs and their self-worth. Nor are the VLTs a game. Monopoly, Scrabble, and Snakes and Ladders are games. VLTs are gambling machines. They can have harmful side effects and are highly addictive. The study reported that the 14% of the population that play VLTs lose an average of \$884 per year. Do they have any idea how much some people would be losing to achieve an average of \$884 when some of them have lost the occasional \$10 or \$20? Do they not realize that a pathological gambler would volunteer to lose \$884 if he could play every day for a year? At \$884 per year there is no cheaper entertainment. One can't go to a theatre once a week for that price. One cannot buy a season ticket to hockey, football or baseball games for \$884. The truth is that some VLT players who show up for treatment, have lost 5 times that amount in one day. Some of our clients have lost as much as \$100 000 in less than a year. Lottery corporations in Canada have a provincial license to market an addictive product, and they use that license in a predatory way. A caring government would not allow a product like this to sap the very existence out of its citizens. A caring government would not take pride in the fact that there has been no increase or decrease in the number of problem gamblers in the past seven years. Dr. Ladouceur speculates that the numbers have remained stable due to "media scrutiny on the dangers of problem gambling" but would like to see a "long term study" following the at-risk group to see how many walk away from the table. Quelle surprise!! Perhaps the number has remained stable because despite the number of problem gamblers who have bottomed out financially and emotionally, and despite the 156 or more problem gamblers who have committed suicide, they are being replaced. They are being replaced by the eagerly anticipated group of adolescents who are presently targeted and being groomed to become the future meat for the

gambling industry to devour. It is perhaps understandable that all of this could happen in a country where multinationals own and operate casinos, but we have the distinct honour of being milked by our own government. And as we traverse the country, we see that every government in power embraces gambling and every government in opposition deplore it. Even though many of us spend time every day educating the populace, fortunately for the gambling industry, P.T. Barnum was right: there **is** a sucker born every minute.