

Op-Ed/Editorials - Do Public Awareness Campaigns Work?

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Public awareness campaigns focused on the addictive disorders have various objectives including enhancing public understanding, encouraging philanthropy, promoting moderation and responsible behaviors, and alerting individuals affected by addiction to resources for help. Our airways, billboards and publications are filled with admonitions to not drink and drive, to quit smoking and to talk to your kids about drugs. We assume that such well-produced, well-funded and well-intentioned efforts must work, don't they? However, research gives public health advertising campaigns a mixed report card. Even with apparent successes, like the decrease in smoking among segments of the adult U.S. population, it is not always clear to scientists why something worked. The bottom line is that prevention can be highly effective, have no impact, or even make the problem worse. In short, no matter how creative, well-intended or well-funded, no public awareness program is a slam dunk.

The question of efficacy is even more difficult to answer when it comes to gambling. On the one hand, we have seen the rise of sophisticated awareness campaigns such as the currently in progress Responsible Gaming Education Week sponsored by the American Gaming Association (AGA). Inspired by the phenomenal popularity of the Lance Armstrong Foundation's yellow "Live Strong" wristbands, the AGA and its member companies are selling a bright orange wristband proclaiming the message, "Keep it Fun!" to benefit the National Center for Responsible Gaming (NCRG) and to spread the word about responsible gaming. (1)



The message of “Keep it Fun” is that gambling should be a recreational activity, not a way to make money or escape from serious problems. Implicit in this theme is the notion that gambling is not a risk-free activity, especially for those who might be vulnerable to developing a gambling disorder because of psychiatric problems or life situation.

An important dimension of “We’re Banding Together to Keep it Fun” is the public display of support for the issue. It’s easy to forget that not too long ago cancer and AIDS were only whispered about owing to widespread fear and ignorance. Addiction, however, remains one of the most stigmatized health problems. I suspect that the stigma of problem gambling has many negative consequences, ranging from the reluctance of individuals to seek treatment to the lack of insurance coverage—in spite of the recognition of pathological gambling as a bona fide mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association since 1980. Just as the tiny ribbons decorating the evening gowns of movie stars on the red carpet demonstrated the widening public support for combating AIDS, the vision of thousands of gaming company employees, customers, elected officials and others wearing bright orange wristbands should help bring the issue out of the shadows and perhaps bring us one step closer to the eventual de-stigmatization of disordered gambling behavior.

On the other hand, it’s impossible to know at this time if such campaigns will be truly effective. The young gambling field has produced few empirical studies to test the efficacy of public awareness programs (Najavits, Grymala, & George, 2003; Ladouceur, et al., 2004). Furthermore, our understanding of why and how people develop gambling disorders must continue to grow in order to figure out the best prevention strategies. This knowledge gap offers an opportunity for an exciting new area of prevention research. As advocated by the Reno model, researchers, public policy makers and the gaming industry must make a

commitment to using rigorous, empirical research investigations to evaluate the effectiveness of responsible gaming programs such as the posting of signs with helpline numbers, self-exclusion programs and employee training (Blaszczynski, Ladouceur, & Shaffer, 2004).

The importance of this issue prompted the NCRG and the Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders to devote the 6th annual NCRG Conference on Gambling and Addiction to the theme, Finding Common Ground on Prevention, Treatment and Policy: The Reno Model. The conference, scheduled for Dec. 7-8, 2005, will be an opportunity for dialogue between scientists, clinicians, gaming industry personnel, public policy makers and regulators on how we can work together to reduce gambling-related harms through responsible gaming practices grounded in scientific research. I invite all who are concerned about gambling as a public health issue to join us for a lively debate.

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Notes

1. In the interest of full disclosure, the National Center for Responsible Gaming supports the BASIS and other research and educational activities of the Division on Addictions through support of the Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders.

References

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For more information about the Gambling and Addiction conference, visit

www.divisiononaddictions.org/institute or www.ncrg.org.