Introduction to the Special Series on Gambling Disorder

March 2, 2018

This spring, voters in my state will head to the polls to make decisions affecting our towns. Along with the usual questions—*Who should represent us? Should we invest in a new school? Should we adjust our property taxes?*— many of us will be faced with a new question: *Should we allow a new form of gambling in our town?* In New Hampshire, cities and towns are deciding whether to allow keno, an electronic gambling game, in bars and restaurants. I imagine that many of us will try to make this decision by weighing the pros and cons of gambling expansion. We will try to forecast whether any of our neighbors will develop new gambling problems if keno becomes available at our favorite downtown restaurant. We might wonder if certain people will be especially vulnerable to these problems and whether there's anything our community can do to help.

There was a time when science couldn't say much about these questions. Fortunately, gambling research has grown at an exponential rate during the past two decades. Some jurisdictions like the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have used gambling expansion as an opportunity to invest in research that might help communities around the world make smarter decisions about the potential benefits and harms of such expansion.

During March 2018, as part of Problem Gambling Awareness Month, The BASIS will showcase some of the latest and most rigorous gambling research. Throughout the month, our science reviews will illustrate how gambling disorder intersects with other expressions of addiction and mental health concerns. First up next week, we will review a study of decision-making impairments common to both Alcohol Use Disorders and Gambling Disorder. Our second science review will describe facets of impulsivity that are common to people with gambling problems and tobacco dependence. Later in the month we will post science reviews covering the effectiveness of brief gambling interventions for outpatients enrolled in substance abuse treatment clinics and the association between online fantasy sports participation and symptoms of Gambling Disorder among college students.

The gambling research that has emerged during the past two decades has provided consistent evidence that not enough people who are struggling with gambling problems reach out for help. Some might not even recognize that they have a problem or know that there are effective self-help resources and professional treatment options available. Others might be afraid to speak up. So, before we launch these science reviews, we begin with an op-ed about the need for more screening for gambling-related problems, especially among people who are especially vulnerable. My colleague Dr. Debi LaPlante will describe our efforts to promote a grassroots initiative called Gambling Disorder Screening Day. Now in its fifth year, Screening Day encourages providers to conduct brief gambling screens on the second Tuesday of March. Our Screening Day Toolkit makes it easier than ever to participate.

We hope you enjoy and learn from this Special Series.

— Heather Gray, Ph.D.