

## Submission for the inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic

I would like to begin my submission by congratulating the Victorian Government for its handling of this unprecedented and extremely difficult time. I believe that the government's thoughtful and caring approach to the pandemic has been noted by all Victorians.

I particularly commend the state's cautionary approach to reopening poker machine rooms in club and hotel venues across Victoria. This is the issue I would like to address more specifically in this submission. We have seen the negative consequences of not mitigating this risk through examples of community transmission occurring in hotels with poker machines in other states, most notably in NSW.

The Victorian Government has clearly been conscious that poker machine venues and rooms attract people with vulnerabilities which may increase transmission of covid-19. Including:

- Hygiene: clinical indicators tell us that people experiencing harm from gambling experience poorer hygiene, may sweat or cry profusely, compulsively rub machines and play more than one machine at a time<sup>1</sup>. Please see the attached study that explores the various visual indicators that someone is experiencing harm from gambling.
- Age: gambling machine users are substantially over-represented among those aged 50 and older and people who identified as indigenous.<sup>2</sup>
- Comorbid conditions: people utilising gambling machines are more likely to be smokers<sup>3</sup> and more likely to have lung conditions such as asthma and to be obese.<sup>4</sup>

As we move forward in responding to the pandemic, I urge the government to continue with its cautious approach and ensure that harm minimisation is front and centre of any future reopening plans. In particular, giving consideration to how opening hours could be modified to reduce risk would be very valuable. As the legislation currently stands, venues may be open 20 hours a day. This results in a situation where some patrons may "venue hop" in order to avoid the mandatory closing period. Such behaviour could hinder contact tracing and appropriate hygiene. For this reason, when venues so reopen, I recommend that a mandatory 12am – 8am closing period be implemented.

Secondly, in relation to applications for further EGM licenses which are lodged with the VCGLR, I urge consideration of legislative change to the Gambling Regulation Act to ensure statutory timelines can be suspended during a state of emergency. It is extremely difficult for communities and councils to respond to electronic gaming machine (EGM) applications during this time, as it

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<sup>1</sup> Delfabbro, P., Thomas, A., & Armstrong, A.R. (2016). [Observable indicators and behaviours for the identification of problem gamblers in venue environments](#)(link is external). *Journal of Behavioral Addiction*, 0, 1-10. DOI: 10.1556/2006.5.2016.065.

<sup>2</sup> Gambling activity in Australia Findings from wave 15 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey Research Report – November 2017 <https://aifs.gov.au/agrc/publications/gambling-activity-australia/2-gambling-participation>

<sup>3</sup> Rockloff, M, Browne, M, Hing, N, Thorne, H, Russell, A, Greer, N, Tran, K, Brook, K & Sproston, K 2020, *Victorian population gambling and health study 2018–2019*, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Justice (2009) A Study of Gambling in Victoria: Problem Gambling from a Public Health Perspective.

would be in any state emergency. Furthermore, it places unreasonable pressure on the VCGLR to make decisions in a dramatically ever-changing environment and with out-of-date evidence.

Thank you for considering my submission and please don't hesitate to call if you would like to further explore any issue raised.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Susan Rennie (DSW)

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