

## Gambling with the nation's health?

### Lottery is immoral

The whore and gambler, by the state  
Licensed, build that nation's fate.

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

EDITOR.—Martin McKee and Franco Sassi's editorial raises an issue that has been largely ignored in the polemic arising since the introduction of the National Lottery.<sup>1</sup> Well directed and amply endowed publicity can realise whatever it sets out to achieve, and selling vice is no exception. When governments set about peddling vice, however, perhaps we need to wake up and ask some questions. None would argue but that gambling is a vice—one in which most of us indulge from time to time without harm. But, as with all vice, there is the problem of over-indulgence, or addiction.

Is there any moral difference between a government that decides one day to nationalise the manufacture of alcohol and then to promote its consumption with a massive publicity drive to raise funds for worthy causes and a government that selects gambling and does likewise? The outcry that would accompany government promotion of alcohol would be focused on the harm that would be inflicted on those (a minority) who would become dependent on alcohol and on the other undesirable effects of that illness, such as road traffic accidents, family violence, and financial hardship. Why then is there no such outcry against government sponsored gambling? Again, addiction to gambling affects a minority of those who indulge in the lottery (and in the philosophy of morality the size of a minority is not permitted as a premise), and the social effects of gambling excesses are not dissimilar to those of alcohol dependence albeit they are less clearly defined, leading to poverty and the need to find alternative sources of finance. But the social effects of the lottery reach far beyond the unfortunate sector that becomes so hopelessly besotted by the television diceman.

An enormous fiscal readjustment in society has resulted since the introduction of the lotteries in both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, with the established charities now faced with starvation while the exchequer is fattened. How many other as yet undetected readjustments have also taken place, such as the diversion of family funds to the lottery from the nutritional needs of children, with consequences that may not

become apparent for a generation? Moreover, such occult effects will manifest themselves in the most deprived sectors of society, in which the lottery gives the greatest hope of release from abject poverty. Ironically, the lottery may be perpetuating the deprivation it seeks to alleviate.

Is it not incumbent on us, therefore, to insist that the government takes more account of the issues, real and potential, that may result from the lottery? We might start by having the lottery acknowledged for what it is—another tax which most affects the lower income groups of society.

EON O'BRIEN

Professor of cardiovascular medicine

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland  
Medical School,  
Dublin 2,  
Republic of Ireland

<sup>1</sup> McKee M, Sassi F. Gambling with the nation's health? *BMJ* 1995;311:521-2. (26 August.)

### Lottery has Orwellian resonances

EDITOR.—The fact that the National Lottery collects disproportionate amounts of money from poor people would not have surprised George Orwell. In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he describes the effect of a lottery on the "proles," the non-party members who constituted 85% of Oceania's population.

The Lottery, with its weekly pay-out of enormous prizes, was the one public event to which the proles paid serious attention. It was probable that there were some millions of proles for whom the Lottery was the principal if not the only reason for remaining alive. It was their delight, their folly, their anodyne, their intellectual stimulant. Where the Lottery was concerned, even people who could barely read and write seemed capable of intricate calculations and staggering feats of memory. There was a whole tribe of men who made a living by selling systems, forecasts and lucky amulets . . . the prizes were largely imaginary. Only small sums were actually paid out, the winners of the big prizes being non-existent persons.

Orwell does not state how Big Brother's regime spent its ill gotten gains. Perhaps some of the money was used to subsidise Winston Smith's rewriting and destruction of historical records in the Ministry of Truth. I wonder what Orwell would have thought of our government spending £13 million of National Lottery money to preserve the jottings of a more famous Winston, Winston Churchill.

T D IVOR CARTMILL  
Consultant microbiologist

Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust,  
Rochdale OL12 9QB

<sup>1</sup> McKee M, Sassi F. Gambling with the nation's health? *BMJ* 1995;311:521-2. (26 August.)  
<sup>2</sup> Orwell G. *Nineteen eighty-four*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983.

### Inability to reason statistically is prime cause of lottery fever

EDITOR.—In their editorial Martin McKee and Franco Sassi express concerns about the public health consequences of the National Lottery, particularly in relation to its encouragement of gambling, redistributive wealth effects, and implications for donations to medical charities.<sup>1</sup> Several important points, however, are neglected. Firstly, the forces driving the spread of lotteries may be more powerful than the authors realise: in the

United States, state lottery revenues are now so huge that they have become a key part of political strategy because they enable politicians to cut unpopular income taxes and replace them with more electorally favoured lotteries.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the latest psychological research in the United States on large scale public wagering has shown another powerful driving force in addition to lotteries' fiscal attraction for governments: larger jackpots result in more betting, and increased betting produces larger jackpots.<sup>3</sup>

These are robust forces driving "lottery fever," yet not everyone plays the lottery. Hence a fundamental issue is the question of why people, given a free choice, choose to gamble when it is not in their interests to do so. The latest psychological research suggests that the answers lie in the public's inability to reason statistically.<sup>4</sup> In fact, failure to appreciate probability and risk outcomes probably underlies most unhealthy behaviour, such as smoking, drinking, refusal of vaccination, and dangerous driving.

Hence public health campaigns should focus on this aspect of public education (perhaps starting in schools by emphasising basic probabilistic reasoning in the curriculum) if an attempt is to be made to combat the negative health effects of the lottery. Surely the medical profession's response to the lottery should be based on the view not that this is a new pathogen but instead that the lottery is a symptom of a wider problem, which occurs to a greater or lesser extent in all of us, not just pathological gamblers. After all, we are choosing, taking, and juggling risks all the time, not just when we scratch a card.

RAJ PERSAUD  
Consultant psychiatrist

Croydon Mental Health Services,  
Westways Rehabilitation Unit,  
West Croydon,  
Surrey CR9 2RR

<sup>1</sup> McKee M, Sassi F. Gambling with the nation's health? *BMJ* 1995;311:521-2. (26 August.)  
<sup>2</sup> Clotfelter CT, Cook PJ. *Selling hope: state lotteries in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.  
<sup>3</sup> Lybns CA, Ghezzi PM. Wagering on a large scale: relationships between public gambling and game manipulations in two state lotteries. *J Appl Behav Anal* 1995;28:127-37.  
<sup>4</sup> Rachlin H. Why do people gamble and keep gambling despite heavy losses? *Psychological Science* 1990;1:294-7.

### Majority of secondary school children buy tickets

EDITOR.—Martin McKee and Franco Sassi's editorial on the National Lottery makes only brief reference to its impact on children.<sup>1</sup> In law, participation is restricted to those aged 16 and over. The results of a survey of children aged between 11½ and 15½ that I conducted in a mixed sex comprehensive secondary school are therefore of interest. The survey showed that 114 (61%) out of 187 children stated that they had bought lottery tickets. This is similar to the participation rate of those aged 16 and over. A more detailed report of the survey will be published in due course.

In the past, it was agreed that gambling should be confined to licensed premises, and in this way children could be excluded. Now, National Lottery tickets are sold in ordinary retail outlets, often next to sweet counters. The prohibition on sales to children has therefore become unenforceable, and 62% of these stores have been reported to sell tickets to under 16 year olds.<sup>2</sup> This has to be

We prefer short letters that relate to a recently published article and we are unlikely to publish letters longer than 400 words and containing over five references. Letters may be shortened. Your letters should be typed with double spacing and include a word count. All authors need to sign the letter and provide one current appointment and address. We encourage you to declare any conflict of interest. Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope if you require an acknowledgment.