



Press Statement

18th December 2020

With the Christmas period bringing more triggers and the potential for increased levels of gambling, the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland has launched their paper on Gambling Disorder today. Calling for an urgent, outright ban on gambling advertisement in sports in early 2021, the College also raises the urgent need for dedicated treatment pathways to tackle the hidden epidemic of gambling addiction in Ireland.

These are just two of the five measures the College, launching their Gambling Disorder Position Paper today, believes are necessary to tackle what is now a public health crisis.

Launching the Gambling Disorder paper in the middle of the Covid-19 public health crisis is important, says the College, as anecdotal information from Consultant Addiction Psychiatrists indicates a concerning rise in gambling disorders referrals since Covid the 'lockdowns', due to isolation, more opportunity to gamble while working from home and higher levels of targeted online advertising.

Gambling Disorder is what is known as a behavioural addiction, one that can cause severe consequences and distress for individuals and their loved ones. Sharing certain features with substance addiction, such as difficulty regulating moods, loss of relationships or employment and financial problems, gambling addiction is often dealt with in secret, easier to disguise, with no obvious physical symptoms.

The newly published paper developed by the Faculty of Addictions Psychiatry of the College, outlines the urgent need in Ireland to tackle gambling disorder through:

- public education
- legislation – Gambling Control Bill
- advertising controls
- treatment services
- research into problem gambling

With stalled progress in the regulation of advertising standards for betting outlets and a lack of specialised services, gambling disorder is a matter of crisis within public health which needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

Discussing advertising standards, Professor Colin O’Gara, Consultant Addictions Psychiatrist specialising in the area of gambling addiction, and lead author of the paper says:



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“We cannot continue to ignore the links between problem gambling and the current high volume of betting ads – be that in traditional TV ads or on team jerseys and side-line banners. Betting has become strongly linked with the enjoyment of sports. We are normalising gambling as a behaviour.

Much like tobacco, in ten years I think we will look back on the proliferation of gambling advertising in sport and entertainment and ask ourselves how we let it get so out of control. Currently gambling advertising in Ireland is much too common and, critically, occurs before the adult television watershed.”

The launch of the paper comes on the back of concerning figures on adolescent gambling habits published recently by ESPAD (The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) for 2019, which show that when compared to their European counterparts, Irish 16 year olds have significantly higher rates of:

- slot machine use, (37% vs 21%),
- sports/animal betting (61% vs 45%) and
- participation in lotteries (52% vs 49%).

Remarking on the current concerns for those with gambling disorders, President of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland, Dr William Flannery says:

“The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been felt harshly by those struggling with problem gambling. Key drivers in the development and relapse of an addiction include loneliness, isolation and boredom – all unfortunate side effects of the necessary social distancing restrictions put in place to stop the spread of the virus since last March.

Even in the absence of live sports, people are finding it difficult to avoid triggers, with increased visibility of online gambling ads and the rollout of new betting platforms. We need to support people with tighter controls and responsible gambling measures inbuilt in the industry.”

The stresses of Covid-19 has challenged the resilience and coping strategies of us all, but particularly individuals with addictions who are finding it even harder to continue in their recovery and avoid relapse.

A focused campaign of legislative reform and public education on gambling addiction by the HSE and Department of Health is needed now more than ever, says the College, in order to address these worrying trends of gambling-related harm and distress.

To read the position paper on Gambling Disorder in full, see [here](#).

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Note for editor

The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland is the professional body for psychiatrists in the Republic of Ireland. It is sole body recognised by the Medical Council and the HSE for the training of doctors to become specialists in psychiatry and for the continuing assurance of the career-long competence of specialists in psychiatry. The mission of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland is to promote excellence in the practice of psychiatry