

## Family support crucial to gamblers

**Reico Wong**

**My Paper**, 24 October 2012

SINGAPORE - Family members of gamblers could unwittingly encourage their habit by dubbing them "lucky".

The gambling habit can also be fuelled when family members share in the spoils of their winnings through treats and presents, or by getting them to make bets on their behalf.

These findings were revealed by experts at the one-day Singapore Problem Gambling Conference, held at the Orchard Hotel Singapore yesterday.

The conference, now in its third edition, was aimed at addressing the harm caused to families of problem gamblers.

It was attended by more than 150 people, mainly those in the field of problem and pathological gambling.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, said that promising a gambler that his problems would not be mentioned to other key family members would also serve to exacerbate the gambling addiction.

Similarly, if family members were to continually allow the gambler to use familial relations or filial piety as reasons to help finance his losses, it would ultimately serve only to do more harm than good, he added.

Dr Mathews was sharing insights from a recent study conducted on problem gambling in Singapore. Some 50 Singaporeans, with a family member who is a pathological or problem gambler, were interviewed.

Among key topics discussed were hardships faced by family members of gamblers, as well as strategies used to cope with having a gambler in the family.

"What we noticed was that families which coped well were fairly close and/or were at least able to mobilise the group to address the family member's problems," said Dr Mathews.

"They were also willing to utilise other resources, like obtaining an exclusion order or calling the police when faced with threats of suicide."

Mr Samson Tse, director of the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at The University of Hong Kong, said that in helping elderly gamblers cope with their addiction, efforts should be made to integrate education on practical money skills as part of retirement planning.

He observed that the "younger elderly", or those who have recently retired, tend to be most prone to becoming gambling addicts.

This is because they suddenly find themselves with free time on their hands and money to spend, he added.

The guest of honour at the event, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing, noted that combating problem gambling is "a never-ending process".

This is because while the problem may have been controlled in one area, it may re-emerge in other forms, he said.

He also pointed out that international studies have shown that problem gamblers affect at least eight to 10 people in their lives.

Mr Charles Lee, programme director of the Thye Hua Kwan Problem Gambling Recovery Centre, encouraged family members of gamblers to seek counselling. They should not just see it as something the gambler himself has to go through, he said.

"They need to be aware that they, too, need to go through the healing process to be able to put the past behind them and to be able to build a positive relationship with the gambler again," he said.