Will Pre-Commitment really work?

What is Pre-Commitment?

Many gamblers find it hard to control the money spent on gambling. A scheme that allows gamblers to determine limits on their playing — known as ‘pre-commitment’ — provide a key mechanism for enabling gamblers to set time limits and spending limits before commencing a session of play. It is based on the principle that decisions relating to expenditure ought to be made in a state of non-emotional arousal, and once made, must be adhered to for the remainder of the session. It is designed to place a limit on the amount of money that the individual can lose in one session. Australia is considering implementing a system of pre-commitment following a recommendation by the Australian Productivity Commission in 2010 to conduct a trial of pre-commitment, and if successful, to implement such a system.

Models of Pre-Commitment

The Productivity Commission discussed a number of models of pre-commitment schemes.

1. **Full pre-commitment**: In order to play an Electronic Gaming Machine (EGM) players would be issued with smart cards that would be inserted into the EGM and play would automatically cease in any venue once the pre-set limit has been reached.

2. **Partial pre-commitment**: Players are given the option of using smart cards or loyalty cards to monitor their level of gambling.

3. **Mandatory schemes**: Requires that all players by law comply with a pre-commitment scheme.

4. **Voluntary scheme**: Leaves the choice up to the individual whether or not to take part in the scheme.

Does the Empirical Literature support the Effectiveness of Pre-Commitment?

The most comprehensive review of the effectiveness of pre-commitment schemes, has been conducted by Ladouceur, Blaszczynski and Lalande (2012). This review found 17 mostly non-peer reviewed studies that examined pre-commitment both in Australia and internationally and largely focused on EGMs.

Ladouceur et al. (2012) highlight the many methodological limitations of this literature including the use of small unrepresentative samples, failure to control for gambling which may have occurred outside of the trial, the possibility that participants may have swapped smart cards with another player and the fact that participants in these trials were frequently able to play EGMs without their allocated smart card.
Most gamblers in these trials (up to 70%) reported that they believed the pre-commitment scheme helped them to reduce their levels of estimated expenditure on gambling and this was confirmed by an analysis of the card data, which revealed approximately 50% of gamblers spent less during the trials. Paradoxically, the card data also revealed that approximately 40% of gamblers actually spent more, which is concerning considering the intention of pre-commitment is to reduce gambling expenditure. Despite the pre-commitment scheme being rated positively by gamblers, it was rated as being unnecessary by non-problem gamblers.

Most participants in these trials (up to 70%) did not use time limit setting options, with participants preferring to only employ limits on money. Despite this the time monitoring feature of pre-commitment schemes was rated favorably by participants although it is not possible from these studies to measure the impact of time monitoring on gambling expenditure.

Although gamblers appear to rate pre-commitment schemes positively and from the analysis of card data it appears these schemes can reduce gambling expenditure, due to the many methodological flaws in this literature it is not possible to make clear conclusions whether these schemes were actually effective. For example, in most trials gamblers could play EGMs without their card, so it is unclear whether these reductions in expenditure on the trial data card actually represent their true gambling expenditure over the period of each trial.

In conclusion, Ladouceur et al. (2012) state that “beyond showing potential promise for a minority, a conclusive statement on the effectiveness of pre-commitment as a reliable and beneficial preventive responsible gambling initiative cannot be offered” (p.14).

Clearly further research and better designed studies which overcome the many methodological limitations inherent in the current pre-commitment literature is required before firm conclusions can be made regarding the effectiveness of a pre-commitment scheme.

References
