

REVIEW PAPER

Suicide and Gambling on the Public Record*Gill D¹, Ahmadi J², Pridmore S¹*¹University of Tasmania, Australia²Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran**Abstract**

Objective: Current western medical wisdom is that suicide is always or almost always the result of mental disorder. Our objective was to explore the public record for a relationship between suicide and gambling, in the absence of mental disorder. **Method:** The public record was examined for examples of individuals without stated evidence of mental disorder who completed suicide in the setting of recent gambling losses. **Results:** We identified a 17th century opinion suggesting gambling losses could lead to suicide, and 10 individual cases (including a decorated policeman, a professional athlete and two engineers). **Conclusions:** This evidence strongly suggests that in the absence of evidence of mental disorder, gambling losses may lead to suicide.

Keywords: Gambling, Suicide, Mental Health

Introduction

Suicide is more common among people with mental disorder than those without mental disorder. The lifetime risk of suicide among people with major depressive disorder is 4-5%¹, which is much higher than the lifetime risk in the general population. Psychological autopsies in the west have consistently found that all² or nearly all³ of those who complete suicide have suffered mental disorders.

However, recent psychological autopsies in the east have found mental disorder in less than 50% of those who completed suicide^{4,5}. This raises important questions about the methodology of earlier psychological autopsies⁶, and suggests other factors may be important.

Our group suggested the concept of “predicament suicide”⁷ in which suicide is considered as a response to intolerable circumstances/predicaments. These predicaments are of two main types, 1) intractable or untreated mental disorder, and 2) social or environmental stressors. Naturally, individual cases may feature both types simultaneously.

With a view to further understand the social/environmental drivers of suicide (which may coexist or separately exist from mental disorder), we have examined accounts of suicide on the public record (from mythology, history, and lay press). We have provided evidence that suicide of apparently mentally healthy individuals may be associated with loss of reputation⁸, recent

legal problems arising from pedophilic activity⁹, moral dilemma¹⁰, and the loss of life savings¹¹. We have also reported suicide pacts, in which the loss of health of one or both members was a powerful driver¹². We are currently gathering evidence of forced marriage resulting in suicide.

We are interested in cases where there is no stated evidence of mental disorder. In this paper we explore the public record for evidence that gambling losses may be associated with suicide. However, as pathological gambling appears in the DSM IV, and it is probable that many individuals described here would satisfy that diagnosis, we are particularly interested in individuals who do not appear to have a mental disorder “other than pathological gambling”.

We contend that all those who suicide are suffering low spirits, dejected, disappointed or demoralized. However, low spirits unless accompanied by other symptoms, do not satisfy the diagnostic criteria of any mental disorder. Strong warnings have been given not to medicalize low spirits^{13,14}.

We are not concerned here with the debate of whether pathological gambling is an addiction, obsession or problem^{15,16}. Instead, we are interested to know whether there is evidence that gambling losses are associated with suicide.

Statements are frequently made by groups opposed to gambling, claiming potential damaging social effects. In a case series of 44 completed gambling-related suicides¹⁷ putative risk factors were comorbid depression, relationship difficulties, and large financial debts. A recent national survey of psychiatric morbidity of adults in England¹⁸ reported that those in debt were twice as likely to think about suicide after

controlling for sociodemographic, economic, social and related factors.

Methods

We examined a range of public records, from mythology to historical texts and news reports (including those available on the internet) for examples of suicide in the setting of gambling. While a broad net was cast, we paid particular attention to the last 70 years, as during this time diagnostic criteria of mental disorders achieved some degree of standardization.

Results

“The Anatomy of Melancholy”

This review focuses on individual cases. However, some relevant comments were made by Robert Burton in early 17th Century book “The Anatomy of Melancholy”¹⁹. He wrote (page 287) that when ‘Love or Gambling’ leads to a loss of all funds, the individual is “left to Shame, Reproach, Despair”. He further stated (page 264) that “a modest man” would “lose his life” rather “than suffer the least defamation of honor”. Thus, at least one author of 400 years ago supported the notion that gambling losses could lead to suicide.

Marc-Antoine Calas (28 years, died 1761)

Marc-Antoine was a son of a Protestant family living in Toulouse, France. He ate a meal with his family and then suddenly disappeared, but was found dead, hanged. The locals assumed that he was preparing to embrace the Catholic faith (as had his younger brother, Louis, a year earlier) and that his father (Jean) had murdered him to prevent this event. Some months later Jean was convicted, broken on the wheel, strangled and his body burnt to ashes²⁰. Family property was confiscated and other members of the family were mistreated.

There had been injustice and eventually Calas's conviction was reversed and the family paid an indemnity. Voltaire²¹ was a leading protester and stated that Marc-Antoine "having lost all his money in gambling, he chose a most proper opportunity for executing his design". The details of this case are sketchy, nevertheless, the indications are that during the 18th Century, gambling losses could lead to suicide.

Stuart and Gertrude Ross (47 and 46 years, died 1936)

Stuart, a ship's engineer and his wife, Gertrude, lived in Sydney, Australia. They placed a note on the door, "Please turn gas off". They attached a rubber tube to their gas stove and lay on the kitchen floor with the other end of the tube and covered themselves with blankets. They died by asphyxiation. The coroner found that gambling debts were the reason for their suicides²².

Carol Warriner (63 years, died 1996)

Carol lived with her husband Skip near Joliet, Illinois²³. She was a retired successful real estate agent. Skip had worked in a chemical factory but was disabled by heart and circulation problems. Carol gambled on the casino boats that operated out of Joliet. She lost their house and savings and was US \$200 000 in debt. She wrote a note saying, "There is no one to blame but me and the monster inside". She also wrote, "Any help you can give with Skip would be appreciated". She attached a hose to the exhaust of their car and died by asphyxiation.

A week later, Skip died by the same means (in the same car).

Solomon Bell (38 years, died 2000)

Solomon was a decorated sergeant who had been in the Detroit Police Department for 12 years. He lived alone in a large house in a well-to-do suburb; he was a sociable man and owned a number of cars including a Cadillac and Jaguar. On his last day he lost money gambling at the MotorCity casino, and then moved on to the MGM Grand Detroit casino, but his luck did not change. At the high-stakes blackjack table he repeatedly doubled his bets and repeatedly lost. He stood up from the table took out his service revolver and shot himself in the head²⁴.

His friends and co-workers knew him to be a recreational gambler. One said, "There were no indications that he was experiencing any difficulty in any aspect of his personal or professional life".

Mario Opalka (44 years, died 2002)

Mario was a council planning officer in Lancashire, UK. He cared for his wife who died of cancer in 2000. He became deeply involved in internet casino gambling, and hanged himself when his debts were in the order of UK Pounds 53 000²⁵.

Katherine Natt (24 years, died 2006)

Katherine lived in Adelaide, South Australia²⁶. She had two children and was co-habiting with a man who was not the father of either child. She was a card dealer at the Skycity Adelaide Casino. Katherine was a heavy user of poker machines in hotels (staff of the Skycity Casino are not allowed to bet at that facility). She was deeply in debt, and although her father had taken over some of her debt and was paying her utility and other expenses, she continued to gamble.

She took a large overdose of paracetamol, wrote a suicide note, and died in hospital of liver failure. In her suicide note she wrote, 'I ruined my marriage with my pokie addiction and then it affected my Dad financially'. She continued that she feared her debts may cause her to lose custody of one or both of her children.

While stressors included Katherine's father being financially damaged, and that she could lose the custody of her children, both of these traced directly back to her gambling debts.

Brian Rockall (43 years, died 2009)

Brian lived with his mother (Valerie, 81 years) in a flat in a well-to-do suburb of Edinburgh, Scotland²⁷. He had no history of convictions and described himself in court when he was a witness on an unrelated matter some years earlier as, 'a professional gambler'. He was an online gambler with UK pounds 10 000 in debt and had not paid utilities or rent for months.

Valerie was found stabbed to death and Brian was found hanged. It is speculated that when Valerie discovered the extent of her son's debt, he murdered her and hanged himself. Police said, "Until the tragic events this week, he has not been on anyone's radar for any reason. He, to all intents and purposes, was just a man living with his elderly mother and leading an unremarkable life".

Kenny McKinley (23 years, died 2010)

Kenny was a talented, highly-paid professional athlete based in Denver, USA²⁸. He had twice injured a knee, which placed his career in some doubt. He was paying child support for a son. He was a frequent gambler and was deeply in debt. His parents and a small number of friends tried to help him with his debts. He owed US\$ 40 000 in

gambling debts and US\$ 65 000 to one of his friends (covering one of his debts). He shot himself in the head.

Ti Pwar and Kay Win (39 and 37 years, died 2011)

Ti Pwar operated a gold shop in the Gyobingauk Market (Burma) where he lived with his wife, Kay Win, and three year old daughter, Pon Sone²⁹. Ti Pwar and Kay Win also sold lottery tickets. They gambled heavily on soccer matches. They had accrued gambling debts of (US\$ 337,078). They wrote a suicide note stating that they did not want Pon Sone to be disgraced, and murdered her, before completing suicide with insecticide. When the bodies were found a Buddhist sermon was playing on a CD.

Locals told reporters that gambling was rife and five other people (including a teacher) had died because of debts by drinking insecticide in the last year.

Sandy Muirhead (63 years, 2012)

Sandy was an engineer, married to Gill and the father of twin daughters. They lived in Birmingham, England. He secretly gambled on slot machines. He could cover his losses until he lost his job, and could only find casual contracts. He had a large overdraft and a loan and had milked their assets. When he could no longer borrow money he hung himself³⁰.

Gill describes Sandy as likable and relaxed, "Any more laid back and he would have been horizontal". She continued, "He was a good husband and father, much loved by family and friends and respected by those he worked with".

Results Summary

We have located an opinion in the early 17th

Century “The Anatomy of Melancholia” suggesting that gambling debts can lead to suicide¹⁹.

We have located 10 individual cases on the public over the period 1761 to 2012. Due to suicide pacts there were 12 individuals involved, 8 male, 4 female; the age range was 23 to 63 years. In no case was there mention of mental disorder. In at least two of these there were clearly other stressors, in one case a man had nursed his wife till she died two years earlier²⁵, and in the other a highly paid athlete who had injured his knee²⁸. There were two suicide pacts^{22,29}, and two murder-suicides^{27,29}.

While this is a heterogeneous group, these cases strongly suggest that gambling losses may be associated with suicide.

Discussion

Current medical wisdom states that all or almost all those who complete suicide do so in response to mental disorder^{2,3}. In this paper we have provided evidence strongly suggesting that gambling debts may be a trigger for suicide. This is consistent with our earlier observation of social/environmental factors playing a role in some suicides^{8,9,12}. While a small series of cases taken from the public record does not prove a connection, it does provide important qualitative information.

Using the public record, as we have, leaves open the challenge that lay reporters may not have noticed important clinical indicators of mental disorder. In response, reporters routinely seek out evidence of mental disorder and are quick to point out failings of the health systems. Their work is open to scrutiny and their continuing employment depends on accuracy. While they may lack the knowledge of clinicians,

this may be balanced by the lack of bias which clinician may harbor³¹. This paper is not quantitative, but merely seeks to demonstrate that gambling losses are among the social/environmental factors which may lead to suicide.

A psychological autopsy of pathological gamblers who had completed suicide³² found 82.4% suffered associated mental disorders (mainly depressive disorders and substance use disorders). This needs to be accepted with caution as psychological autopsies can feature methodological difficulties⁶. While depressive disorders and substance use disorders may have been present, this does not mean the economic losses from gambling did not play a significant role. Further, this autopsy nevertheless found no mental disorder in 17.6% of gamblers who took their own lives, leaving gambling stress as the only factor. It seems clear, however, is that gamblers with large debts are unlikely to seek help for psychiatric disorders^{32,33}.

As mentioned, two of the ten cases detailed had additional social/environmental stressors – one individual had been bereaved two years earlier, and one individual’s income was under some threat because of a knee injury.

It came as a surprise that two cases were associated with murder-suicide. It is probable that in one case²⁹ parents decided to kill their daughter to spare her from disgrace. It is possible that in another case²⁷ a man unpremeditatedly killed his mother when she confronted him with his debts.

Until recently, the importance of mental disorder in suicide was emphasized. However, it has recently been confirmed that suicide can occur in the absence of mental disorder³⁴. A paper on “Suicide and

Impossible Worlds”³⁵ finds that the worlds of suicidal people are “impossible/unlivable; gambling losses may place people in “impossible worlds”.

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