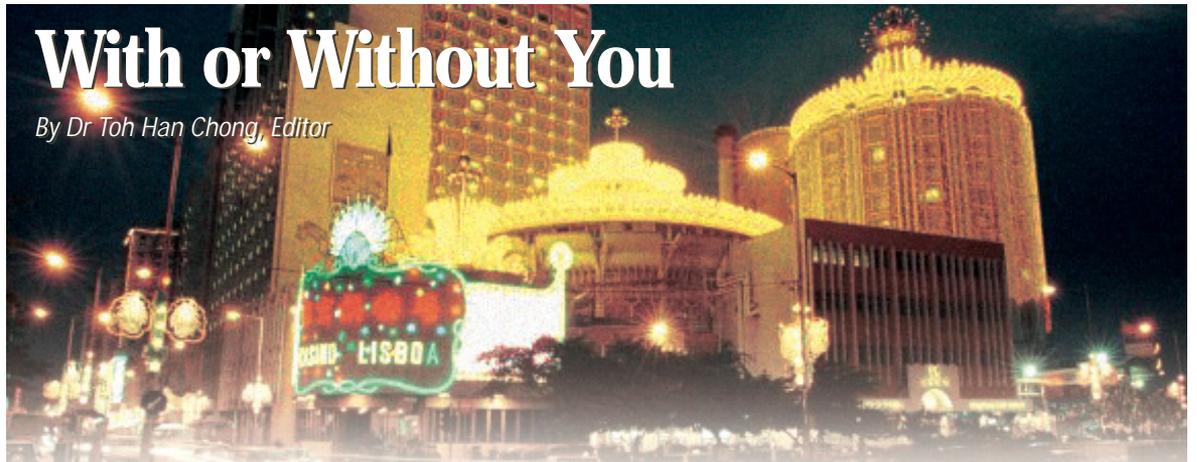


# With or Without You

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor



## DESIRE

Today is 18-04 – D-Day for the Great Casino Decision. Or should I say 4-D Day? And it is a Yes to two “Integrated Resorts”. On this manic Monday, *tai tais*, tycoons, *aunties*, *uncles*, *ah lians* and *ah bungs* will scramble to buy these auspicious four digits. But while 4-D is no 24-7 high-roller gambling, casino gambling can potentially be a crash-and-burn high-stakes round-the-clock addiction. As Dr Munidasa Winslow has clearly articulated in this month’s *SMA News* lead article, gambling is not just a social, moral or economic issue – it is a public health issue.

One hundred years ago, most forms of gambling were considered criminal. Today, two thirds of adults gamble regularly and 1.5% of adults gamble excessively. Casinos as cash cows are sprouting up globally like the proliferation of NTUC-Comfort Delgro Moove Media cardboard cow ads dotting the Singapore grassland. In the United Kingdom (UK), a new gambling bill will increase Britons’ access and appetite to gamble. Potential super-casinos are already being considered to energise slummy post-industrial cities throughout the UK, and British children will now be allowed to play Category D fruit machines.

## VERTIGO

**“I said, hey honey, take a walk on the wild side.”**

- *Walk on the Wild Side*, Lou Reed

The landmark 1997 Harvard Medical School meta-analysis of 152 gambling prevalence studies spanning 25 years revealed that the combined lifetime prevalence of problem and pathological gambling was 5.5%. More alarming was the prevalence rate in adolescents at 13.3%. It is the lure of gambling among the impressionable young that worries most parents once an accessible gaming culture permeates society.

Based on this report, I fell into the greatest risk profile for gambling-related problems: male sex, youth (I am young compared to the 102-year-old patient in my follow-up clinic), concurrent substance abuse (coffee and chocolates), and mental illness (surviving medical school and housemanship). The



Harvard meta-analysis also confirmed that gambling expansion was associated with increases in problem and pathological gambling. Interestingly, Harvard University was built largely with lottery money in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In his article, Dr Winslow described the personal, family and health-related problems that may arise from gambling and from gambling withdrawal. In 2003, with the opening of casinos in South Dakota, USA, child abuse and domestic assaults rose by 42% and 80% respectively. Sudden cardiac death rates are proportionately higher (83% of deaths in an Atlantic City study) among deaths in casinos. The lower and lower-middle class spends more on gambling (2.2%) as a proportion of their income than the rich (0.5%). The public health impact of the UK National Lottery on society includes widening socio-economic inequalities, health inequalities and a lower life expectancy.

Observers of social trends may remind us that emerging societies like Singapore have already opened the floodgates to other serious public health epidemics. The *McDonaldisation* of the world with its fast food culture comprising 17,000 McDonalds restaurants in 120 countries, including over 130 McDonalds in Singapore alone, has contributed to the obesity problem worldwide. Forty-four million Americans are obese, 6 million are super-obese, and 280,000 Americans die from being overweight every year. The number of overweight children in China has tripled with economic liberalisation. This lipid epidemic has escalated the incidence of both ischaemic heart disease and cancer. Now that the ‘fat’ is out of the bag, activists have appealed for regulations to ban fast food advertisements that prey on children, and fast food empires are desperately changing their menus to lower and lighten calorie consumption.

The Internet with its virtual infinity of potentials, portals and power, has truly globalised the individual and his personal computer, and also created endless possibilities of temptations including Internet gambling.

So, with our air, water, food and homes poisoned by toxic modernisation, what more harm can two Integrated Resorts, nowhere near the juggernaut casinos of Macau, do to our Small Island? Will Singapore become *SIN*gapore once the casino comes to town in 2009? Will this mandate from Government Heaven to build Integrated Resorts in Singapore send a signal to the future generation that it is fine to legalise gambling as long as we end up with extra moola redirected into our financial

◀ Page 8 – With or Without You

backyard instead of elsewhere?

It would certainly be an unsettling experience for our doctors to see more roughed-up debt-laden gamblers, alcoholics in delirium, wives battered senseless by depressed gambling addicts, generations of children neglected or abused in homes with problem gambling, increased requests for MCs, extra cardiac arrests especially with Viagra-in-hand, and loan-shark lackeys with cuts and foreign bodies in eyes from chopping up too many pigs' heads.

SILVER AND GOLD

***“Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works.”***

- Gordon Gekko, from the film *Wall Street*

A GDP increase of 2%, job creation and sustaining a greater than 6% market share of the Asia-Pacific tourism market have been touted as much needed goals of Integrated Resorts to keep Singapore from being the dowdy wallflower in the new and exciting party scene of boomtown Asia. I wonder whether the 35,000 new jobs potentially generated by Integrated Resorts include addiction counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, A&E doctors, nurses, paramedics, family counsellors and social workers.

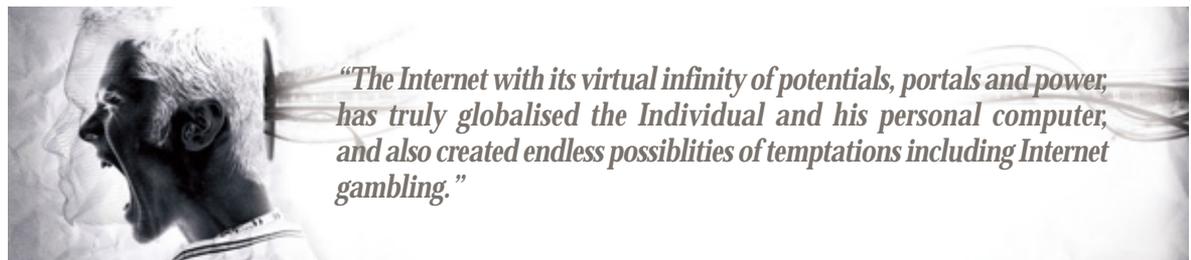
The Singapore Cabinet is deeply divided on the Great Casino Debate. DPM Tony Tan publicly pointed out that every additional

I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR  
***“If we have talent, we don't need to be sexy to be popular.”***

- Siti Nurhaliza, Malaysian Pop Princess

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew recently admitted that there are huge revenues to be made in Pop Culture. So now, we have to be more hip and happening and build this City on Rock-and-Roll, but without the Sex and Drugs. The top-down mandate now is to shed the square image and get an extreme makeover. Let us botox our service sector, give Orchard Road a facelift, breast augment the Esplanade high culture, and butt-tuck our leisure industry, all to seduce the foreign *buck, yen, pound, ringgit and renminbi*. Relax and welcome to the Pleasuredom, but you will not find any East European and Cecilia-Cheung-look-a-like hostesses, cocaine haze, gangland vice or mega-bright lights here.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong assures the public that the Integrated Resorts will not be a crass monument to pop culture bad taste. In other words, it will not be an in-your-face boobys, belly-button-flashing, sexpot Britney-Spears-style casino. Instead, it will be wholesome Stefanie-Sun-style Integrated Resorts for all the family with a 5% built-in casino and just a sprinkle of glitz but no local advertisements. When I was in Shanghai and Taipei, larger-than-life ads and song airplay of our petite pop icon Sun Yan Zi were everywhere, which was a source of great pride for me.



Singapore family that is affected by the ravages of problem gambling will hurt Singapore. Every Singaporean counts. Not one less.

The Old Guard reaction to this Great Casino Debate is reminiscent of a scene from that classic film *Wall Street*, which depicts the unbridled greed of the 1980s Corporate America, and the attendant speculative gambling of trillions in stocks and bonds. Carl Fox (played by Martin Sheen) is the gritty working class blue-collar everyman in a small airline company making a hard-earned modest and honest living. His son, Bud Fox (played by real-life son Charlie Sheen) is a slick, successful and instantly rich disciple of slimy corporate raider Gordon Gekko. After a dubious deal proposed by Gekko, Carl, smelling a rat, takes his son Bud aside and tells him privately, “Stop going for the easy buck and start producing something with your life. Create, instead of living off the buying and selling of others.” Bud retorts that the world has changed, that his old man is jealous of his success and insinuates that Carl is a loser. Father and son would reconcile later after Carl gets a heart attack. And justice would prevail.

But, what if one day casinos end up obsolete like Britney Spears' songs, when a total gambling experience can enter a much more private, portable and interactive level in the privacy of homes, and technology can escalate new waves of entertainment to mind-blowing heights, so that Integrated Resorts become carcasses like Haw Par Villa, Tang Village and Sentosa's Asian Village? Can Singapore develop attractions and super complexes of greatness that would endure the test of time like the legendary music of U2, whose songs have more soul than sleaze?

PRIDE (IN THE NAME OF LOVE)

***“Adventure upon all the tickets in the lottery, and you lose for certain; and the greater the number of your tickets the nearer your approach to this certainty.”***

- Adam Smith, Moral Philosopher, Father of Modern Economics and author of *The Wealth of Nations*

Holidaying in Edinburgh in the summer of 2004, my family and



I visited the gravesite of Adam Smith, the Father of Free Market Capitalism, at the Canongate churchyard. There were no neon signs or rhinestone bust of Adam Smith, and it was hard to find as it was tucked away in a quiet corner. I wonder if he would have considered gambling as a rational act of self-interest in line with his economic theory. More than all casinos put together, the visionary ideas of Adam Smith have put more money into the pockets of the common man and their nations. But underlying his political economic theory were deep roots of ethics, morality and jurisprudence.

Recently, there has been debate about how the medical community may be seen to be compromising its profession for bottom-lines with offers of discount coupons and hocus pocus therapies. Medical moralists may fear the slippery slope of an imagined Integrated Health Resort (IHR) of the future, where there would be slot machines in waiting rooms (no one will then complain of long waiting times anymore), slot machines to manage stroke recovery and post-mastectomy lymphoedema patients, roulette tables to improve hand-eye co-ordination in

patients with sensorimotor dysfunctions, nurses doubling up as croupiers in the hospital's recreation room (what a way to create more nursing jobs), mahjong and poker leagues to keep geriatric patients from bemoaning the winter of their lives, and other gambling machines that go 'ping!' which could give hospitals and clinics the biggest bang for the buck.

But in these IHRs, there would arguably be no breakdown of trust between doctor and patient because medical treatments would proceed as per normal, informed consent is needed before allowing any gambling activities, a highly regulated close circuit TV gambling monitoring system would be in place, leaving little to chance except for the throw of the dice, like in Las Vegas, and singing doctors would serenade their patients with "I've got you under my skin...." before proceeding to take their blood. Everything is done to make the patient feel like singing "I did it....mmyyyyyy way!" as he leaves the hospital happy, and most likely much poorer, to the cheers and *can-can* dancing of the hospital team.

The Integrated Resorts may not be the Brave New World but a protégé like the IHR will be. ■