

# Gambling On Our Young

By Dr Daniel Fung, Deputy Editor

**A**s I sat back to watch Jack Neo's *The Best Bet* on DVD, it reminded me of the so-called Casino Debate. At the crux of this debate is the question of whether we as a nation can exercise self-control, given the influences and temptations of the globalised world we live in. But my concern is not the adults – it is the young who I am worried about. Children, unlike adults, are not masters of their own fates. They are subject to the whims and fancies of adults who care for them.

Much has been said of the dangers of gambling at multiple levels having both personal as well as societal impacts. But I am concerned more about the impact of the new economy on our young. In this brave new world, our young have two major challenges.

The first is the conscious choice of parents in leaving the raising of the next generation to the multitudes of care-givers such as domestic servants and childcare providers. Sometimes this may mean questionable values that are being transmitted.

The next major challenge is the presence and access to activities that can be potentially addictive. I am not talking about drugs and cigarettes, which are well-known agents for addiction. Instead, I worry about the computer games and other “entertainment” available in our instant world. With the touch of a button, children can access the Internet, watch online movies and play interactive multi-player games twenty-four-seven (a new buzzword meaning that you can do it all the time, 24 hours, seven days a week). Some of these addictive behaviours also result in new dangers, such as young teens, usually girls, who

meet men on the internet and end up being sexually abused. Gambling and casinos are just extensions of this new world of fast thrills and spills.

Obviously not every child is at risk. I know of families whose parents have made conscious efforts to supervise their children, and of mothers who choose to go part-time or even stop working to care for their young. And there are children who will not partake of this entertainment lifestyle even if this is presented to them, as they would rather read or play childhood make-believe games with Lego bricks.

But studies are demonstrating some evidence that there are some who are at risk. Adult studies have suggested that risk-taking behaviour has a physiological basis. There may be noradrenergic abnormalities in the brain as evidenced by increased urinary norepinephrine, as well as subnormal levels of plasma 3 methoxy-4-hydroxyphenylglycol (MHPG) and increased CSF MHPG. Epidemiological studies have also shown the co-occurrence of drug addictions with pathological gambling.

The casino debate is but one aspect of a more global worry on addictive behaviours and our young in general. Doctors have a role to play in this as we can advise parents and teachers on how to identify children with sensation-seeking personality traits. These children are more prone to addictive behaviours, which can include anything from over-use of Internet chat-lines to serious drug addictions. Prevention in this area is certainly better than cure as most studies show that addictions are difficult to treat. ■



## About the author:

*Dr Daniel Fung is married to Joyce, and sometimes, to his work. Fortunately, Joyce has kept his feet on the ground by sharing with him five wonderful children who are a constant reminder for his work as a child psychiatrist.*

