

Change pokie rules plea

By Matt Crossman

Health experts have called for drastic changes to rules for club-operated gaming venues following revelations that Sunbury pokies operators are listing items such as replacement of grease traps as benefiting the community.

Latest Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation reports show that Sunbury's three club-operated venues also lodged claims for things such as administration fees and cleaning and security expenses.

Under current laws, clubs operating pokies pay a reduced rate of tax compared to hotels as long as they show 8.33 per cent of the venue's poker machine revenue was spent on "approved community benefits".

Approved benefits can include housing assistance for the disadvantaged and poverty relief and services for the prevention and treatment of problem gambling and drug and alcohol addiction.

According to the commission, none of the Sunbury venues recorded any expenditure in those categories, although Sunbury Bowling Club listed \$7166 for the provision of health care and \$500 for "other philanthropic purposes".

Monash University public health professor Charles Livingstone said that while the commission's reports showed significant funds were directed to community sports facilities and activities, they remained deeply concerning.

"The reason they have this whole procedure in place is to legitimise the amount of money the clubs, but also pokies generally, rip out of communities," he said.

"Time after time, what we find is that two-thirds, and in many cases more, of the claimed benefits are actually the running costs of the clubs. It's airconditioning or capital works ... a new TV. The rules need to be tightened and these loopholes closed."

Dr Livingstone said typical arguments that club-run pokies created many jobs and generated significant economic activity were "nonsense".

"Poker machines are not a magic pudding," he said. "What they do is take that money away from other businesses."

Sunbury Community Health's general manager of child, youth and family services, Marcus Bosch, said calls for reform were justified, with studies consistently showing most of the money raked in by pokies came from problem gamblers.

"The majority of the clients of our gambling counselling service have a problem with poker machines," he said.

"The initial, most evident issue is obviously financial distress, but they often are also experiencing extreme emotional distress."

Managements of pokie venues Sunbury Football Social Club, Sunbury United Sporting Club and Sunbury Bowling Club did not respond to questions before deadline.