

Redundant workers turn to pokies

By Matt Crossman

New data reveals more than \$70 million has been gambled on poker machines in Hume since the start of the financial year.

Latest Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation figures also show that more than \$9.3 million was poured into Sunbury's 230 poker machines in the six months to December, with the annual spend likely to nudge \$20 million.

More than \$6 million was spent on the 103 machines in the Macedon Ranges.

The figures have been met with concern by researchers and community health experts, who believe that fewer people are playing the machines but those who do are more likely to be problem gamblers.

Sunbury Community Health child, youth and family services manager Marcus Bosch said counsellors had noticed a disturbing trend – clients who had received redundancy payouts becoming addicted to gambling.

"[They're] often unaware that the payouts result in a preclusion period, preventing them from receiving Centrelink benefits," Mr Bosch

said. "Without work, they can suddenly find themselves lonely and isolated, with time on their hands and their redundancy payout available to them."

Mr Bosch said most people using SCH's gambling counselling service had a problem with poker machines.

"Many people still aren't aware that gambling can develop into a genuine addiction similar to substance addiction, which is why it has such a destructive impact on the lives of so many people," he said. "Gambling addiction doesn't just affect the person with the addiction but

has flow-on effects to family members and friends."

Mr Bosch echoed Monash University public health professor Charles Livingstone, who recently told *Star Weekly* arguments that club-run pokies created many jobs and generated significant economic activity were "nonsense".

"We see the real damage to people's lives that is caused by addiction to poker machines," Mr Bosch said.

"The harm of poker machines greatly exceeds any benefits."