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Essay

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Sometimes you're just lucky: A memoir



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Throughout my career in psychiatry I have been lucky, as I was when I joined the staff of South Oaks Hospital, in Amityville, New York, in the fall of 1983. I was hired to run the adult addiction services at this lovely, privately owned psychiatric hospital that was founded in 1882. The addiction services included inpatient detoxification, dual diagnosis and rehab units and an extensive array of outpatient services. Of special interest to me was the newly organized treatment service for compulsive gamblers, which was integrated with other addiction services, but included a variety of separate activities. I had been interested in compulsive gambling since the late 1960s when one of my recovering alcoholic patients came to me for help with his gambling. But I had been heading the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse for the previous four years, and that state agency did not have jurisdiction over this area (it belonged to the Office of Mental Health).

The first person I met connected to the gambling program was Henry Lesieur. He was then professor of sociology at St. John's University in Queens and had been hired as a research consultant under the South Oaks Foundation, a not-for-profit educational and research group funded by the hospital. He had begun work on developing a screening tool that recognized gambling problems in clinical populations. I was delighted to be part of this project, as the lack of a simple way to

identify gambling problems made it difficult to convince my colleagues that they had unrecognized compulsive gamblers in their caseloads. DSM-III had been published only three years earlier, and offered, for the first time, standardized diagnostic criteria for "pathological" gambling (newly renamed to avoid confusion with obsessive-compulsive disorder). Interest was growing and a screening questionnaire was sorely needed.

Working with Henry was a great pleasure. He was both knowledgeable about gambling problems, and curious to learn more. Several research projects came out of the work at South Oaks, and we wrote a series of papers together. Henry later enrolled in the counseling course we gave in our South Oaks Institute of Alcoholism and Behavioral Addiction Studies (part of the Foundation), and served as an intern on the treatment service, treating both pathological gamblers and other people with addictions. Henry was unusual in that he was a good researcher and an effective counselor. Being a professor and an intern simultaneously did not seem to be a problem for Henry, who is a naturally warm and unpretentious person with a good sense of humor.

I recall working on the paper that launched the South Oaks Gambling Screen in 1987 (Lesieur & Blume, 1987). We sat in my office trying to figure out a catchy name for our product, one that would yield a pronounceable acronym. We originally hoped to produce something like MAST (Michigan Alcohol Screening Test), an easy name to use. We tried dozens of four- and five-letter combinations before ending up with SOGS. We hoped that it wouldn't remind people of something soggy, and it didn't. In fact, the SOGS has now been translated into 35 languages, from Africaans and Arabic to Xhosa and Zulu, and it is in use worldwide. That is a wonderful tribute to Henry's foresight.

Henry left New York and South Oaks, and I didn't get to see him often afterwards, but I have kept in touch with his career and his work. I feel fortunate to have known and worked with Henry, a true pioneer and a giant in our field.

Reference

Lesieur H.R. & Blume S.B. (1987).

The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS): A new instrument for the identification of pathological gamblers. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144 (9), 1184–1188.

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Sheila Blume, MD, is a pioneer in the field of addiction. She began specializing in alcoholism treatment in 1962 and developed services in the state of New York hospital system and served as New York State Commissioner for alcoholism from 1979–1983. She is a past president and long-time chair of the Public Policy Committee of the American Society of Addiction Medicine. She chaired the Committee on Treatment Services for Addicted Patients of the American Psychiatric Association, where she is now a member of the Council on Addiction Psychiatry. Dr. Blume became interested in gambling problems in the early 1970s. While at South Oaks (from 1983 until her retirement in 1998) she ran treatment services for pathological gamblers and collaborated with Henry Lesieur in a number of research projects.

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