

SMOKE-FREE CASINOS?



Without a doubt, one of the matters giving most cause for debate worldwide in recent months is the banning of smoking in public areas.

The damage caused by tobacco is undeniable, and has been explained clearly on several occasions by the World Health Organisation (WHO), which has left in the hands of the different national governments the measures and decisions to be taken on the subject.

In one of its recent reports, it estimates that some five million persons will die in 2007 due to smoking-related causes. Unanimity on the negative effects of smoking is total.

However, where there is no agreement is in how national lawmakers try to stop people smoking. There are legal criteria for all different tastes and countries, such as the USA, where the laws are much more restrictive than in others.

In recent months, these limitations have been zooming towards gaming establishments.

The French Government, for example, has decided to ban smoking in Casinos from 2007, although it has given an adaptation period of until 1 January 2008 to allow establishments to adapt to the new situation. If French Casinos decide to set up smoking areas, that is all they can be used for, and you will not be able to have a drink there, for example. Why?

In other countries such as Chile, the measure is much more logical: as from May 2007, Casinos will have to chose between being smoking or non-smoking.

Another example of diversity of criteria can be found in the USA, where the Muckleshoot Indian Casino was inaugurated last September, with the peculiarity that it is a non-smoking Casino.

In countries where these types of measures have been in operation for some time, the consequences have been devastating. New Zealand, which has been applying these measures since 2004, was one of the pioneers in tobacco restriction. Since then, New Zealand Casinos have seen a big drop in revenues, of approximately 13-17%. The SkyCity Entertainment Group alone had a shortfall of almost \$8 million in 2005.

In Spain we can see how the smoking areas of Bingo halls are always full, while there is hardly anybody in the no-smoking areas.

One upshot of all these government decisions is that at the latest edition of the Las Vegas fair, for example, there were a large number of companies devoted to manufacturing filters and air purifiers, to blow clean air between croupiers and players.

As an executive from one of these companies explained, "When a person comes to a table and wants to smoke, they press a button, operating a filter that sucks away cigarette smoke and ash".

Installing this new technology in Casinos and gaming establishments could cost over \$2.000 per table, although the manufacturers consider that this investment could pay itself back within three years.

It is obviously necessary to ban smoking in certain closed public spaces. However, the radical way in which it is being done does not seem logical. Things cannot be totally reversed overnight, especially in the case of an addictive substance, difficult to give up.

Several generations have grown up with tobacco as a habitual element in their lives and the lives of their idols. Who doesn't remember Winston Churchill, Ernest Hemingway, James Bond, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, Brigitte Bardot, and a long list of famous personalities, with a cigarette in their mouth or in their hand.

We could also remember that, in the mid 20th century, one of the milestones of gender equality was that women could smoke in public. However, a few short years after this success for feminism, it seems smoking has become a mortal sin. Things must be done calmly and gradually, giving better results than force and hurry. Accordingly, turning everything upside down overnight is not the best way to do things. There is such a thing as a happy medium. It would be much better to apply less restrictive, more tolerant policies, starting by ensuring that the younger generations know that smoking is harmful.

This is not an apology for smoking. Quite the opposite. What we are defending is a gradual change to new standards, applied even-handedly.

How far are we from Casinos where you can't smoke, drink ... or gamble.



