Problem gambling: Prevention’s the best bet against addiction

International Advisory Panel, jointly chaired by two local experts, will help identify the steps to be taken

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With more than 20 years’ experience dealing with gambling addiction in eight different countries, American sociologist Rachel Volberg has a pretty good notion of what works and what doesn’t.

She thinks it is an excellent idea to set up a centre to prevent, treat and contain addiction problems before the casinos open their doors here this year.

Otherwise, Singapore could end up like the state of Nevada in the United States, where 6 per cent of the adult population is addicted to gambling.

Dr Volberg told The Straits Times: “The addiction is in place. It will lead them to declare bankruptcy... it is incredibly disruptive to affected families. Many spouses have stress-related health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes. Their kids have a high rate of depression and delinquency, they do poorly in school and many become addicted to drugs, alcohol and gambling too.”

She is one of eight foreign experts roped in as members of the International Advisory Panel to help Singapore tackle the potential problem early. She was the first to arrive for a three-day meeting, which started yesterday, to help chart the course Singapore should take.

Four of the experts, including Dr Volberg, were picked by the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG), and the other four by the Ministry of Health (MOH).

The panel is jointly chaired by Professor David Chan of the Singapore Management University and Professor Goh Chee Leok of the National Skin Centre.

The experts come from the US, Australia, Canada, Britain, New Zealand and Hong Kong, with a wealth of experience tackling gambling addiction under their belts.

They have done extensive research into problem gambling and set up treatment and prevention models in other countries.

They will help identify the steps Singapore can take to prevent addiction to gambling primarily, but also to drugs and alcohol. They will also suggest ways to control the addiction problem, should it arise, and highlight useful areas of research.

Their conclusions will be submitted to the MOH and the NCPG by the end of this month.

Prof Chan, who lectures in psychology, said that the panel – embodying a range of disciplines from psychiatry, sociology and psychology to clinical practice and research – will not only be able to advise on how best to prevent, control and treat gambling and other addictions, it will help identify the steps Singapore should take.

“We may take the message to schools,” he said. “And even to kindergartens,” he added, poker-faced.

Prof Goh also wants to tap the panel’s expertise with the setting up of the National Addiction Management Centre, which will be built at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

He said: “We want them to advise us on its size, staffing and operational cost. And whether it is going to end up as a white elephant. We don’t know what the magnitude of the problem will be, but we have to make provision.

While the focus of the centre is gambling addiction, it will also deal with other forms of compulsion.”