SINGAPORE: More professionals and frontline staff will be trained in the next few months so that they can identify and tackle problem gambling.

The personnel involved will include those from community and social services agencies.

This was disclosed by the National Council of Problem Gambling, which has accepted a list of recommendations made by an International Advisory Panel (IAP).

The council said advertisements help to remind the public of the harm caused by problem gambling. It noted that every time it launches such campaigns, the number of calls to its Helpline goes up.

For example, from December 2007 to January 2008, the number of calls to its Helpline was about 150 per month.

But when an advertisement on problem gambling was launched in February 2008, the number of calls in that month jumped to about 340.

That is why continuous public education will be a mainstay. This was one recommendation made by the IAP, which was set up to help Singapore chart its strategies in tackling potential problem gambling and other addictions.

Professor David Chan, Co-chairman of the National Council on Problem Gambling, said: "One of the things that we should not do is that one size message should fit all in public education.

"What we learnt from other countries’ mistakes is that you need a tailored approach to different segments of the population - to the youths and the elderly.

"The message has to be couched differently and even the medium used has to be quite different; and for youths, for example, the internet is going to be an important medium of communication."

Professor Chan added that continuous public education is also important especially as studies have shown that there is an uptrend of glamorising and normalising of gambling.

He said: "You see that in drama serials and movies, and that's a concern because by glamorising something, you make it positive and make people less aware of the danger of getting into problem gambling.

"So in the same way in Singapore, we have done surveys and we think there is an extent of normalisation of gambling. We are not sure about the glamorising part, but the last thing you want to do is to glamorise gambling - to make it too easy and positive - because that is the first step towards potential problem gambling."

To coordinate efforts, a planning committee led by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) will be set up by May.

This committee, together with other organisations, aim to extend and strengthen addictions management services that are already available under the IMH's Community Addictions Management Programme (CAMP).

Over the next few months, the Health Ministry and the National Council on Problem Gambling will be working on the implementation details of the recommendations.
The priority will be to train professionals and staff to tackle the issue of problem gambling as well as conduct research in the area.

Professor Goh Chee Leok, Co-chairman, International Advisory Panel, said: "We are talking about psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors and they will look into the holistic aspect of how to manage the addiction problems.

"We generally have few people interested in doing psychiatry. We have to boost this interest and try to get as many people coming on board to participate in this programme."

Detailed studies will also be carried out over the next few months to find out what the young and the elderly have to say about their involvement in gambling.

International studies show that youths are two to four times more susceptible to problem gambling compared to adults.

The recommendations by the IAP are the result of a few months of discussions.

IAP members comprise experts from the US, Canada, Australia, Britain, New Zealand and Hong Kong, who have a wealth of experience in tackling problem gambling in their own countries. - CNA/vm