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Coronial investigation highlights dangers of gaming disorders

The dangerous impact gaming can have on the psychological wellbeing of adolescents and young adults is the subject of a new coronial report released today following the death of a 13-year-old boy.

Victorian Coroner Paresa Spanos commenced the investigation into the passing of Oliver Cronin after he was found unresponsive at his family home in Loch on 25 October 2019.

In the year preceding his death, Oliver became obsessed with computer gaming. This affected his behaviour, which was at times irrational and aggressive. At the time of his death, Oliver was on a technology ban after being suspended from school for his conduct.

Coroner Spanos sought to understand whether Oliver's gaming addiction was a mental disorder and if it contributed to his death. Following advice from experts, Her Honour found that his behaviours suggested he had a gaming disorder.

According to the World Health Organization, gaming disorder is characterised by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behaviour and includes marked distress or significant impairment in personal, family, social and other important areas of life.

Such disorders often appear in high school, usually affecting males who play role-playing games and who spend time at home alone. People with a gaming disorder may also experience social phobia, disruptive behaviours, mood, anxiety, and personality disorders.

Coroner Spanos noted that while evidence supports the existence of gaming disorders, its diagnosis and treatment are not well understood. "It is clear that current understanding of the prevention of gaming disorders and the diagnosis and treatment of gaming disorders is neither extensive nor rigorous," Her Honour said.

Furthermore, Her Honour found that compared to other countries with specialised gaming disorder services, Australia has limited information and support for those dealing with gaming addiction.

"Comparatively, Australia has not acted as proactively as other nations and actions and policy are not informed by local information or standardised," said Her Honour. "This places parents, families, and schools in the position of being unaware and unsure of what is the best thing to do to prevent gaming disorder and promote healthy online behaviours or how to react in situations where there are indications of problem behaviours associated with gaming."

Research by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner into gaming found online multiplayer gaming is a very popular activity for young Australians, with 6 in 10 young people aged 8 to 17 years having played these games and nearly 1 in 2 young people having played eSport video games.

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Media Release



Coroners Court
of Victoria

To promote public health and safety and prevent similar deaths, Coroner Spanos has recommended the Office of the eSafety Commissioner:

- raises awareness in adolescents and young adults of the risks of gaming on their psychological wellbeing
- promote the inclusion of information about gaming and psychological wellbeing in school-based digital health programs.
- promote research that establishes the incidence and prevalence of psychological harms to adolescents and young adults from online gaming.

A copy of the report can be accessed here:

<https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/COR%202019%20005840%20-Finding%20-%20O.Cronin.pdf>

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