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Wednesday, Dec 15, 2004

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Posted on Tue, Dec. 14, 2004

### Drugs could be in the cards for problem gamblers

RICK ALM

The day is drawing near when compulsive gamblers might pop a pill to combat their self-destructive urges.

San Diego-based **Somaxon Pharmaceuticals Inc.** appears to be the first U.S. firm to stake a formal claim on a treatment drug.

The company recently announced it has obtained North American licensing rights to a Finnish firm's treatment for impulse control disorders using the drug nalmefene hydrochloride.

An intravenous version of that chemical cocktail already is permitted for use in the United States to counteract morphine and other opiate drug overdoses.

If clinical trials next year with test groups of gamblers prove effective, Somaxon president and chief executive Ken Cohen said the company would seek federal **Food and Drug Administration** approval for commercial use. This could take several more years, however.

"Everybody knows that gambling in this country has undergone spectacular growth," said Cohen. "Problem gambling is a significant illness and public health problem. There is no effective treatment for these people.

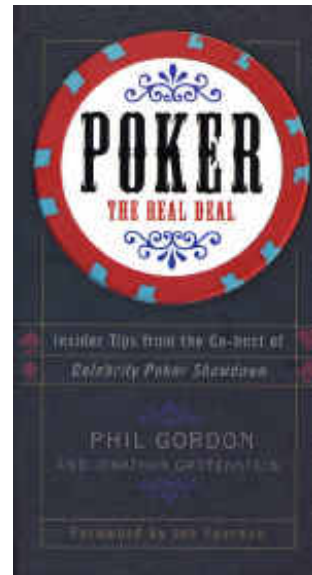
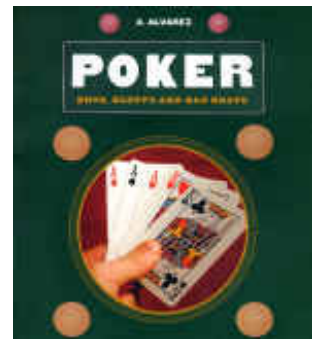
"We're reluctant to refer to anything as a magic bullet. But we think it has great promise. We know from phase two studies the drug had a significant effect compared to the placebo."



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Researchers for years have been trying to unlock the mysterious causes of addiction, and most evidence points to chemical imbalances in the brain's pleasure-and-reward responses to stimulus.

The medical community's understanding of gambling addiction may have taken a leap forward with the disclosure last week of a new theory by researcher Howard J. Shaffer and others at **Harvard Medical School**.

The team advanced its "syndrome" theory that suggests all addictions may stem from a common root.

Addiction, said Shaffer, may simply manifest itself in whatever addictive object is most accessible, affordable or attractive. The co-occurrence of multiple addictions has long been documented and may "signal the presence of an underlying force responsible for addiction," the study said.

For support, the study cited other research that has explored "addiction hopping" by victims, particularly those in recovery, who shift from drug addiction, for instance, to gambling or some other compulsive activity such as exercise.

The study also noted the positive effect drugs such as nalmefene and naltraxone have had in both substance abuse and behavioral addiction research patients.

"In many ways this is an expression of my career's work," Shaffer said in an interview. "I've just never stood back and put it together in one paper. This is probably the strongest case ever" to link substance and behavioral addictions, he said.

Shaffer expects to make waves among professional colleagues who believe addiction doesn't occur without a physical stimulant.

Shaffer's camp agrees substance addictions — alcohol and nicotine for instance — may be more potent, but he argues "the brain can get excited by certain behavioral activity" alone.

Much more study is needed, said Shaffer, before the syndrome theory can be established as fact.

**More books**

The poker craze has spawned a tidy little coffee-table homage to the history and culture of the game.

*Poker: Bets, Bluffs and Bad Beats* (**Chronicle Books**; \$18.95) is a 125-page oversized paperback printed on extraordinarily heavy gloss stock, lavishly illustrated and lovingly narrated by British author A. Alvarez, who bills himself as perhaps the only published poet to ever have competed in the World Series of Poker.

Alvarez, a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, confesses to a lifelong affair with poker, which is "not so much a game of cards as a style of life."

The book offers precious few strategic tips on how to play the cards. But it is a joyful lesson on how to appreciate and play the game.

Rich photographs and artwork illustrate poker's history and allure — from Hollywood stills of famous poker table scenes, to artifacts of the game, such as a cheater's card-up-the-sleeve "holdout" device and a close-up of a playing card for the Persian game of "As-Nas," from which some say poker evolved.

If you'd rather explore the nitty-gritty nuances of when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em, try Phil Gordon's *Poker: The Real Deal* (**Simon Spotlight Entertainment/Simon & Schuster**; \$19.95).

The game is Texas Hold 'Em, of course, and professional player Gordon, co-host of **Bravo's** "Celebrity Poker Showdown" and a bona fide ex-rocket scientist, weaves his game advice amid unvarnished observations about the culture and characters of the game.

"Poker is a very social game, as long as you don't mind socializing with a tired, drunk and unshaven lot who'd like nothing more than to separate you from your money."

Meanwhile, syndicated blackjack writer Richard Harvey has compiled his columns in *New Ways to Win More at Blackjack* (**Mystic Ridge Books**; \$14.95).

Harvey's advice is not for the faint-of-heart. A computer whiz, Harvey tinkers with the game's traditional strategies or trashes them outright.

His latest effort offers bite-sized essays on all aspects of his game where, for instance, splitting 10s and not splitting aces have their place.

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