

The Sun-Herald

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2006

\$1.60 INCLUDING GST

Anorexia treatment programs starved of funding

By CAROLINE MARCUS

It is little wonder young Australians are being diagnosed with anorexia at an alarming rate and much earlier in life. Part of the problem is the conflicting messages being sent to our young people via the media, fashion industry, schools and, yes, the State Government.

These groups must accept responsibility for helping to fuel the disease by transmitting messages that are easily misinterpreted by those already vulnerable.

Images of rake-thin celebrities such as Nicole Richie are accompanied by media criticism of others, such as Britney Spears, who have gained weight.

Schools and the Government have embarked on campaigns putting the focus squarely on obesity. While the childhood obesity epidemic is obviously a very deep problem, some medical and eating disorder experts say too much

emphasis on obesity and eating the "right" food is causing a backlash.

Anorexia is the most common chronic disease after obesity and asthma in adolescents and young women – and a far more deadly condition than either of those two illnesses, according to the NSW Centre for Eating Disorders.

About 560 new cases are diagnosed each year in NSW; 4200 patients are affected by the disorder at any one time. The average age of onset has dropped from 16 to between 12 and 14 in the past five years.

So what is the solution?

Some Australian families have thrown up their hands in frustration, instead choosing to bundle their children off to Sweden.

A specialist eating disorder program at the Stockholm-based Karolinska Institute reportedly has a 75 per cent success rate, but the treatment costs Australians hundreds of

thousands of dollars and there is no government assistance. Yet it is fully subsidised for Swedes by their government.

The NSW Government says it has developed a draft eating disorders plan to co-ordinate existing services and provide a framework for the expansion of services. Any commitment is welcome, but when will the changes actually take place?

Meanwhile, the Federal Government continues to suggest the disease, despite its prevalence, is a private health issue.

There are no Commonwealth-funded anorexia or other eating disorder programs, while patients are able to access only some Medicare rebates for treatments such as visits to GPs, psychologists and psychiatrists.

It is time to stop shifting responsibility between state, federal and private health care and start doing something to stop a disease increasingly killing our young people.

Desperate anorexia battle

Parents paying \$2000 a day for Swedish cure

By CAROLINE MARCUS

DESPERATE families of young anorexics have sought treatment in Sweden, fearing their children would die under the Australian health system.

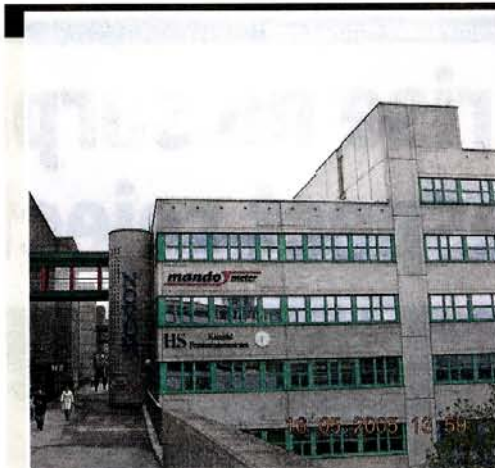
The Karolinska Institute has treated 26 girls and young women from Australia since August 2003 at a cost of up to \$2000 a day.

The medical university uses a non-drug-based program that treats the disease as a behavioural disorder, rather than the psychiatric illness that it is widely considered to be by the international medical community.

In March the Swedish institute opened the Mandometer Clinic in Melbourne, which offers follow-up treatment but not hospitalisation.

The NSW Government has announced the introduction of a draft eating disorders service plan, following inquiries by *The Sun-Herald*.

A spokeswoman for Cherie Burton, the minister responsible for mental health, admitted that treatment outcomes from traditional therapies were "mixed", but said there were plans to



HELPING AUSTRALIANS: The Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

TREATMENT AT A COST

- Patients can be admitted to the Swedish institute for up to 14 months.
- Further care in Melbourne can continue for an average of between nine to 12 months for a severely ill patient.
- Treatment in Sweden costs \$1000-\$2000 a day, depending on whether the patient is hospitalised or in outpatient programs.
- In Melbourne, patients pay up to \$1000 a day for a full-day session at the Mandometer Clinic.
- Treatment has a 75 per cent success rate, with a relapse rate of less than 10 per cent, says Swedish founder Cecilia Bergh.
- It has been available for 13 years in Sweden, where it is fully subsidised by the Government.



improve existing services and to expand options across the state.

There are just seven adult and 12 child or adolescent public hospital beds dedicated to the treatment of eating disorders in the state.

A 2005 report by the NSW Centre for Eating and Dieting Disorders recommended at least 40 treatment places for adults alone.

Pediatrician John Court said treatment was "not adequate at all".

Dr Court said patients often

required long hospital stays, but some did not make any progress.

Sydney parents said they felt they had no choice but to make the long, expensive journey to Sweden.

Alex Gill had everything going for her before she was diagnosed with anorexia this year at the age of 14.

The year 9 student was a high achiever at school and a gifted sailor, who represented the state in her sport.

But the Castlecrag teenager had been hiding a secret obsession with

food that involved limiting her daily diet to a small amount of fruit and vegetables and caused her weight and body mass index to drop to a dangerously low level.

When her mother, Camilla, noticed how underweight her daughter had become, she took her to hospital, where Alex was treated as an outpatient.

Mrs Gill made the decision to fly Alex to Sweden rather than continue treatment here as it became clear her

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pushes families overseas

daughter was not improving and would require hospitalisation.

"It just became like being on a treadmill or roundabout," Mrs Gill said. "It was two steps forward, one step backwards. We did not even want to go down that path and allow that failure to happen, so we decided to go to Stockholm."

Mother and daughter went to Sweden in July, and Alex spent 10 weeks as a hospital outpatient at a cost of \$10,000 a week.

Alex went into remission and returned to Sydney in October, in time for her to attend training for a national tournament this month.

Alex, now 15, said: "My eating behaviour just got to what society thinks is like perfect eating, eliminating anything that society thinks is bad for you. You see the models and actresses and the [magazines] are like, 'Oh my God, they're eating pizza.' What do you do?"

Families receive no Federal Government support for treatment costs in Sweden or Victoria.

Parents have formed a lobby group to pressure the Federal Government to subsidise the treatment. The group will have its first meeting on Tuesday.

Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott's office said there was no program for anorexia or eating disorders, but patients were eligible for rebates for visits to GPs, psychologists and psychiatrists under Medicare's mental health items, introduced on November 1.



RECOVERED: Alex Gill, 15, spent 10 weeks as an outpatient at the Swedish institute, at a cost of \$100,000.

Picture: DANIELLE SMITH