



# “Statistics on the extent of anorexia are horrifying”

**SUFFERERS ARE LITERALLY DYING TO BE THIN, SAYS KATE ELLIS**

**I** HAVE no doubt my Christmas lunch this year will end as it does every year – with me lying on my mother’s couch after over-indulging in a home-cooked feast.

Once again I will overeat the festive turkey, the local ham and, of course, the irresistible Christmas pudding like so many of my fellow Australians.

There is one group of Australians who will not take part in this annual gluttony though, and sadly they are increasing in numbers. Reported cases of anorexia and eating disorders are on the rise. It is an issue which we must shine a spotlight on and urgently act upon.

There has quite rightly been much public debate about childhood obesity and the need to address it. But we must not ignore the other end of the spectrum and the Australians, mainly women, who are literally dying to be thin.

Anorexia is the third most prevalent chronic illness in adolescent girls. One in 20 Australian women now admit to having suffered from an eating disorder.

Sadly, the horrifying statistics continue. Not only are we seeing more cases but the victims are getting younger.

Children as young as five are now being diagnosed with anorexia. Can you even imagine a five-year-old child starving to be thin? It is now an all-too-sad reality.

Five years ago the average age of anorexia sufferers was 16. The typical age of onset is now between 12 and 14.

Surely we must act on this as a priority issue.

Eating disorders are not just about a quest to be thin; they are

psychological illnesses with devastating physical consequences.

There may not be one easy answer but, as I have recently argued in Parliament, we must do more to address the many underlying issues.

Kevin Rudd has often talked of “the blame game” in recent times – the buck-passing from the Howard Government to the states. Unfortunately this issue provides yet another example.

Victorian Labor MP Anna Burke has been working hard to promote awareness of this issue and to call for federal action. She has written to the Howard Government calling for increased funding for research and a national summit to devise a code of conduct.

While some blame the media for encouraging these diseases, others point the finger at the fashion industry. In my mind, we gain nothing from this and should instead bring all the stakeholders together to develop a plan and tackle this issue head-on.

This is precisely what the Italian Government announced this week when its Youth Minister agreed to work with the fashion industry on a code of conduct to promote a healthier look. Back home, our Federal Government is resisting such calls.

South Australia’s own Christopher Pyne decided to get in on the blame game when he responded as Parliamentary Secretary by arguing: “In Australia the direct provision and regulation of public mental health services is the responsibility of state and territory governments.”

This is less than inspiring at the very least. It is ludicrous to suggest each state should have its own standards for advertising, media, the

fashion industry and health regulation. This phenomenon is a national issue, we need some national leadership.

Some may be unaware of the emergence of rather frightening websites promoting eating disorders to our youth.

I will not delve into the disturbing images these pro-anorexia sites convey, but their messages are universally horrific: from starving during pregnancy to egging each other on in the race to be skeleton thin.

I know many Australian web servers have been active in removing these sites. However, those that remain are sending horrific messages that bones equal beauty, that people do not need food and, as one site says: “Nothing can’t be fixed with hunger and weight loss.”

The Howard Government has resisted Labor calls to ban these sites with Phillip Ruddock stating “there are no intentions to change this”.

This is shameful negligence to a generation of Australians crying out for assistance as they suffer to be thin. There are too many Australians and their families suffering from these devastating diseases. There are too many Australians dying from them.

The Government must do more to send the message that healthy is beautiful, and that this country takes the issue of poor body image and eating disorders seriously.

Five-year-old children starving themselves is surely a sign that we cannot ignore.

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**NO ROLE MODEL:** This image, from a pro-anorexia website, shows a model digitally 'pinched' to make her look even thinner