

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.

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