

# CHAPTER ONE – AN INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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1.1 The issue of body image development and the effect of negative body image upon young people is of major importance to the Victorian community. As the following chapters of this report will show, a significant proportion of young people are affected to a significant degree and the Committee welcomes this Inquiry, in part, as an avenue to highlight an issue in the community which at times has been neglected.

1.2 The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry require the identification of broad issues and the suggestion of possible solutions. The Committee is concerned about the growing discrepancy between the popularised “thin ideal” and increasing levels of overweight and obesity in Victoria. As such, this report focuses on the broader social determinants of body image development and raises issues relating to the prevention of body image dissatisfaction, making recommendations as to changes in service provision and early intervention.

1.3 It is the Committee’s understanding that body image dissatisfaction occurs more commonly in young females than males, and is most severe between the ages 15-22 years. While it has been estimated that it can result in extreme dieting and eating disorders in 2-4% of the population, the Committee is particularly concerned with the

sub-clinical presentations of poor body image, as it affects a greater proportion of young people. These include:

- Restrictive dieting behaviours and disordered eating patterns;
- Weight cycling;
- Inadvertent weight gain;
- Lower participation in physical activity;
- Low self esteem and feelings of worthlessness; and
- Anxiety and depression.

1.4 Major factors in the development of body image can be briefly stated as follows:

- Peer influence & consumerism;
- Mainstream media, the model industry, and fashion retailers;
- Family characteristics;
- Individual personality traits;
- Body weight and stigmatisation; and
- Health professionals and health messages.

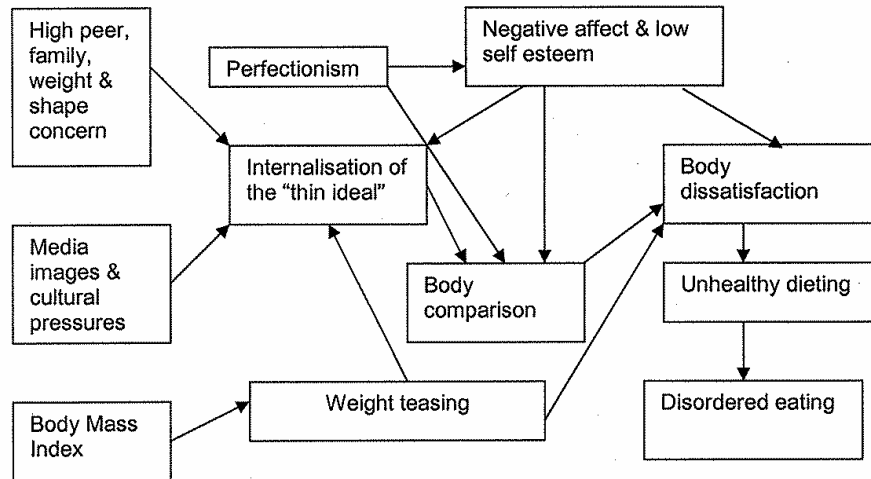
These issues will be dealt with in more detail in the second chapter of this report.

## **Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction and Eating Disorders**

1.5 There is a distinction between body image and body dissatisfaction which involves a general concern with the appearance of the body. Eating disorders involve psychological aspects that have mental and physical implications which are different from problems associated with obesity. However, there are overlaps and links, and it has become clear in the Inquiry that body image involves self esteem, body esteem, and healthy eating. Eating disorders involve different

issues and different solutions. The emotional elements of fear, sadness, and anger are critical. The risks factors for body image dissatisfaction can be summarised in the following diagram.

**Risk factors for body dissatisfaction**



## Understanding Body Image and Body Image Disturbance

1.6 There is a major focus on body image amongst young people.<sup>1</sup> Further, with a higher proportion of the population overweight than before, there is an increasing emphasis on weight as well as shape.

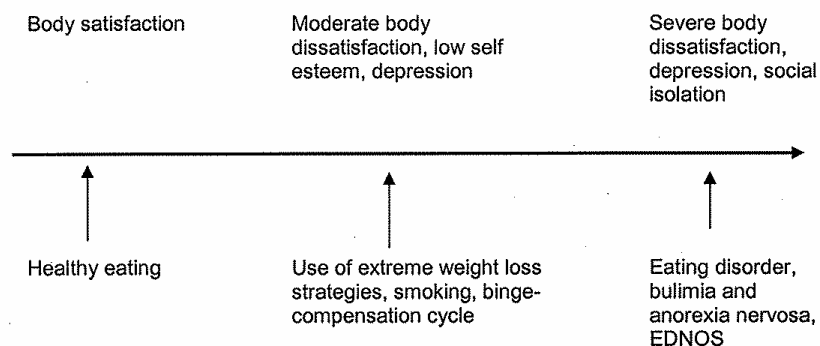
1.7 Body image encompasses feelings of body satisfaction, self-esteem and beliefs about appearance. From a clinical perspective, body image disturbance is more complex than just a fear of being overweight or a drive for thinness. There is overwhelming evidence<sup>2, 3, 4, 5</sup> that body image is intrinsically linked with self-esteem and resilience. As previously stated, the factors that affect and shape it include the beliefs and modelling behaviours within families, peer groups and the media.

## The Links Between Body Image And Eating Disorders

1.8 The third chapter of this report discusses the way in which body image disturbance relates to the manifestation of an eating disorder. The evidence is still inconclusive in relation to cause and effect. However, the emphasis a society places on appearance does seem to affect the way people feel about themselves.<sup>6,7</sup>

1.9 There is a clear relationship between high levels of disordered body image and development of eating disorders. By definition, body image disturbance is one criterion for the diagnosis of both bulimia and anorexia nervosa. What is unclear however is whether body image dissatisfaction leads to dieting and eating disordered behaviour or whether this results from dieting and a focus on one's body. The following diagram illustrates what has become apparent from testimony to the Committee:

### Spectrum of Body Image

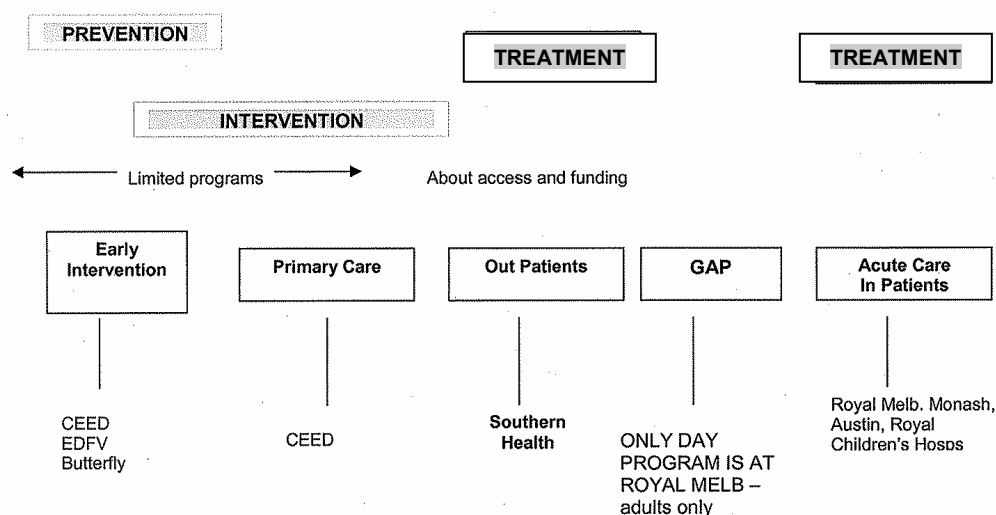


1.10 As well as describing the development of body image and the conditions in which body image dissatisfaction can occur, this report attempts to identify areas of good practice in body image promotion

programs and recommends that further initiatives in this area should address the following two problems:

- the broader socio-cultural determinants of body image development, such as developing more size-accepting cultures in the media, fashion and retail arenas; and
- the use of schools as a setting, targeting young peoples' values, beliefs and attitudes; and promoting individual resilience and self-worth, as well as healthy eating.

1.11 There are few broad level prevention programs that have measured changes in body image satisfaction. Evaluation of body image strategies will be an important requirement of any future work.



1.12 The body image agenda should be framed within an obesity prevention strategy. Size acceptance issues can be infused into health messages about healthy weight, if relevant policy makers are sensitised to body image concerns. A policy mainstreaming approach reduces fragmentation and potential message conflicts.

## **An Integrated Approach to Addressing Negative Body Image**

1.13 Within the framework of prevention, intervention and treatment, discussion has focused on how an integrated approach to dealing with body image issues is the best strategic approach. In particular, health-centred rather than weight-centred disorders involve different issues and different solutions. The emotional elements of fear sadness and anger are critical. There is a need to be aware of labels, but overall body image is the major concern as it is dissatisfaction that causes problems. The final chapter of this report discusses health promotion strategies which address total lifestyle and healthy eating solutions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Davis C Shuster B Blakemore E Fox J "Looking Good Family Focus on appearance and risk of Eating Disorders" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 35 (2) 136-44 2004 March.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham S "Dieting, Body Weight, Body Image and Self Esteem in Young Women: Doctors Dilemmas" *Medical Journal of Australia* 178 607-11 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Joshi, R Herman CP Polivy J "Self Enhancing Effects of Exposure to thin body Images" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 35(3) 333-41 2004 April.

<sup>4</sup> Mendelson B McLaren L Gauvin L Steiger H "The relationship of Self Esteem and Body Esteem in Women with and without Eating Disorders" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 31(3) 318-23 2002 April.

<sup>5</sup> Wade T Lowes J "Variables associated with Disturbed Eating habits and Overvalued Ideas about the Personal Implications of Body Shape and Weight in a Female Adolescent Population" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 39-45 2002 Nov.

<sup>6</sup> Abdollahi, P and Mann,T " Eating Disorder Symptoms and Body Image Concerns in Iran: Comparisons between Iranian women in Iran and in America" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 30(3) 259-68 2001 Nov.

<sup>7</sup> Waller G Barnes J "Preconscious processing of Body Image cues. Impact on body percept and concept" *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 53 (5) 1037-41 2002 Nov.

