

# Expert says doctors not taking eating disorders seriously

September 15 2010

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A mental health expert from the University of Western Sydney says it is disappointing that, despite the increased knowledge and awareness of eating disorders, some health professionals in Australia are not taking patients seriously unless their weight has reached a dangerous level.

Professor Phillipa Hay from UWS School of Medicine will present the findings of a qualitative community study of Australian women with eating disorders at the Mental Wellbeing Conference in Sydney this week.

From in-depth interviews with 57 Australian women with a bulimia-type disorder, the study found that while 74 percent were aware that they had a significant problem with eating only 28 percent sought professional treatment.

When questioned about their reasons for seeking professional help, 75 percent of these women admitted that their motivation was to gain assistance in losing weight.

"It is incredibly difficult for people with eating disorders to come forward, admit that they have a problem, and ask for help," says Professor Hay.

"In this particular study, only a small number of the participants actually disclosed their eating disordered behaviors to a health professional and, from the women who did, there were reports that their symptoms were dismissed because they were 'not emaciated'."

Professor Hay says there appears to be a perception amongst some [health professionals](#) that, unless the patient's weight is at a dangerous level, their [eating disorder](#) is not a serious issue.

"There are medical practitioners in this country who do not regard eating disordered behaviours such as purging, bingeing and strict dieting as serious problems," says Professor Hay.

"This is extremely worrying, as there can be severe health implications for disordered eating, even before weight becomes an issue. Regular purging, for example, can lead to dehydration, fainting, and markedly depleted levels of [potassium](#), which can cause heart attacks from disturbed [heart rhythms](#) (arrhythmias)."

According to Professor Hay, between 10 and 50 percent of people with eating disorders do not access effective treatments. With so few women prepared to come forward and request help, it is up to health professionals to pick up on the tell-tale signs.

"Whenever a patient seeks help regarding weight, it is up to the health professional to ask questions about the person's eating behaviours which could help to identify an eating disorder that would have otherwise have remained hidden," she says.

"The results of the current study indicate that many patients would welcome such questions. In fact, 90.9 percent of the participants, who had not initially volunteered information regarding their eating disorder to a health professional, did disclose such information when asked directly about it."

Participants in the qualitative study were derived from the *Health and Well-being of Female Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Residents Study* of women with bulimic-type eating disorders in the community in

2008-2009.

The findings of the study will be presented at the University of Western Sydney's inaugural Mental Wellbeing Conference on Thursday September 16 2010, at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre in Darling Harbour.

On Tuesday September 14, the Hon Barbara Perry MP, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health) and Member for Auburn, joined UWS Vice Chancellor Professor Janice Reid at the official welcome reception of the Conference.

Provided by University of Western Sydney

Citation: Expert says doctors not taking eating disorders seriously (2010, September 15) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-09-expert-doctors-disorders.html>

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