Eating disorders flying under the radar

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Eating disorders are increasingly overlooked in Australia because society is too focused on obesity prevention, a leading Flinders University psychologist says.

Body image expert Professor Tracey Wade (pictured) says the ever-increasing spotlight on overweight and obesity is detracting attention from disordered eating – despite statistics showing that binge eating and fasting have doubled in SA from 1998 to 2008, and that 23 per cent of young Australian women have experienced disordered eating in the past 12 months.

"If you asked people what's worse, being overweight or having an eating disorder, a lot of people would probably say obesity but eating disorders are quite destructive because they cause depression, anxiety, a number of health problems and even shorten lives," Professor Wade, based in the School of Psychology, said.

"Over the years society has tried to overcome racism, homophobia and sexism because we regard them as bad things but a lot of people look at fat people and think there's something wrong with them and that they should be in the out group," she said.

"People have a personal reaction to obesity so it captures a lot of media and emotional attention, which tends to detract from eating disorders, but there's no reason why the two should compete – obesity is a different problem that just happens to be a weight problem."

The under-diagnosis of eating disorders will be among the issues canvassed at the [10th Annual Conference of the Australia and New Zealand Academy for Eating Disorders](link), held at the Crowne Plaza Adelaide from August 23-25.

Co-sponsored by Flinders University, the conference will bring together more than 250 body image and mental health experts – including Flinders Professor Marika Tiggemann as a keynote speaker – to present research on the theme 'One decade on, where are we now?'

Professor Wade, who is the scientific convenor of the conference, said aside from the increased societal emphasis on [obesity](link), eating disorders were also overlooked in the promotion and awareness of mental health.

"Eating disorders are like the poor cousins in the mental health family," she said.

"We tend to hear a lot nowadays about depression, anxiety and psychosis yet eating disorders often aren't featured in the information about mental health, even though it's a serious mental illness."

Professor Wade said it was important to debunk the common myth that eating disorders were "just a trivial problem about dieting".

"The public perception is that it's all about being vain and wanting to be thin – people don't understand that not eating is a symptom of a serious [mental health](link) problem.

"A lot of the time you get your media celebrity types who lose a bit of weight and the whole issue becomes a spectator sport, it's almost glamorised in a way.

"People need to understand what an eating disorder is rather than what it

ends up looking like."

Provided by Flinders University