

## Royal College of Psychiatrists' briefing on Pro Ana websites

The Eating Disorders Section of the Royal College of Psychiatrists strongly supports EDM 659:

*'That this House is deeply concerned about Pro Ana web sites which promote anorexia and offer inappropriate encouragement, tips and tricks to potential victims of this terrible affliction; and calls on the Government to investigate ways to deal with such sites, which cause devastation for people and families, and to support sites which offer help and advice to victims and parents.'*

Pro Ana websites are of particular concern to the College and below we provide evidence supporting our concerns:

Several studies have investigated the content of pro-anorexia websites (see reference list). Several key findings emerge:

- Key website characteristics include purpose of website (75%), information about webmaster (67%), website disclaimers (58%), and information on "tips and tricks" (67%). Religious metaphors, lifestyle descriptions, and "thinspiration" (inspirational photo galleries and quotes that aim to serve as motivators for weight loss) are frequently present (Norris et al., 2006).
- The "Tips and Tricks" section of these sites are typically directed at dieting/restricting calories (28.6%) and distraction (14.0%). Most disturbing, 11% of comments are directed at lying and concealing symptoms (Harshbarger et al., 2008).
- Even in healthy young women viewing such websites induces negative affect, low self esteem and more negative views about their appearance than viewing a comparison website related to female fashion (using average-sized models) or home décor. Additionally, young women viewing such sites perceived themselves as heavier, reported a greater likelihood of exercising and thinking about their weight in the near future, and engaged in more image comparison (Bardone-Cone and Cass (2007).
- Viewing such websites is common and attracts vulnerable young people: In a study of 13 to 17-year old school children 12.6% of the girls and 5.9% of the boys had visited such websites (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2009). Girls who visited pro-anorexia sites had a higher drive for thinness, worse perception of their appearance and more perfectionism, i.e. were a high risk group for the development of eating disorders.

If you would like further background information, we are happy to arrange a meeting. We can also provide you with additional electronic information if you would like it.

Please contact Neil Balmer, Public Affairs Manager, Royal College of Psychiatrists on [nbalmer@rcpsych.ac.uk](mailto:nbalmer@rcpsych.ac.uk) or 0207 235 2351 x149.

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### References:

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