

Goodbye Twiggy

hello fat, happy women

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Canadian University Press

Soon it will be spring, the season when young men's hearts turn to love and young women's thoughts turn to dieting.

It's the time of year when advertisers begin marketing summer clothes by plastering bus terminals, magazine pages and newspapers with pictures of thin, attractive women. Along with fashionable clothes, they are also selling fashionable shapes. This season's preferred body is tall and thin.

Many women dream this will be the year they lose enough weight to wear a bikini or look good in the latest designer jeans, and so the diet craze on Canadian campuses begins.

While dieting to reach a certain body size isn't exactly a new phenomenon, a sharp increase in the number of women suffering from dieting-related diseases means more doctors are questioning our attitudes towards body size and weight loss.

According to Dr. Hedy Fry, chair of the British Columbia Medical Association's nutrition committee, as many as four to 20 per cent of female university students have bulimia, and as many as 25 per cent show symptoms of anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Both illnesses are characterized by an obsession with weight, food and thinness. Although some men suffer from eating disorders, more than 90 per cent of anorexics and bulimics are women.

In British Columbia, Fry is trying to find out just how widespread the incidence of eating disorders is. She's conducting a survey to see how many people suffer from bulimia or anorexia nervosa to some degree. Fry believes that while the number of women who end up in hospital may not be that high, there are lots of people who have some symptoms associated with the disorders.

"It's important to reach people before they get to hospital. The ones who do it for a long time without detection suffer guilt, depression and low self-esteem leading to psychological damage," she says. "Physicians and nurses aren't recognizing the problem early enough. They see only the very sick ones in urgent need of treatment."

While psychologists suspect the twin eating disorders have similar causes there are important differences between anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Anorexia nervosa usually begins with a desire to lose weight through dieting and exercise. After an initial weight loss, dieting then becomes an obsession and its victims consider themselves too fat, no matter how much weight they lose. At some point, anorexics simply stop eating; some starve themselves to death.

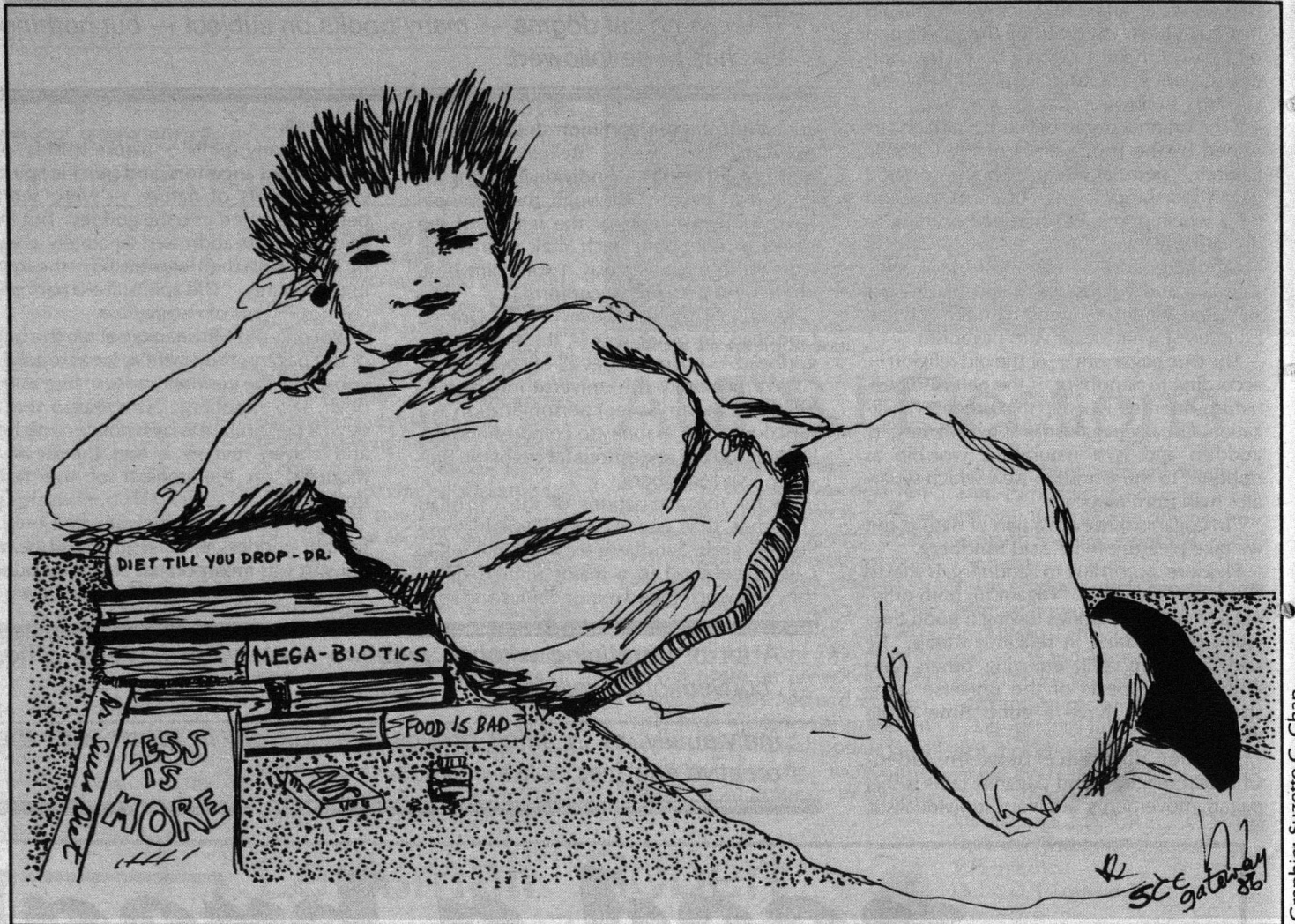
Bulimia is less understood than anorexia. It is also more difficult to detect because it may not involve the same drastic weight loss. Bulimics diet too, but they also practice the binge and purge syndrome. Bulimics often take in a large quantity of food and then purge it by making themselves vomit. Some bulimics use commercial laxatives or diuretics to rid their bodies of the calories. Others exercise for three or more hours a day.

Of the two diseases, anorexia nervosa is far easier to detect. Its victims show visible symptoms in a relatively short period of time. They lose up to 30 per cent of their body weight, menstruation ceases and in the later stages a fine growth of hair covers their body. The disease must be treated or they will die.

Signs of bulimia are not as obvious. A concern about weight and frequent exercising may seem normal and bulimics often lie or hide their vomiting in shame. Bulimic patterns can continue for years. It is not harmless, though. High acidity in vomit erodes teeth and maintaining an artificially low weight is not healthy.

Lynn Andrews, a counsellor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, started a discussion group for students with bulimia when she realized how widespread the problem was on her campus. The six week old group meets to discuss nutrition and eating habits. Andrews says she hopes it will help students discover healthy eating habits.

"A lot of these women are afraid to eat normal meals. They are afraid of food," says Andrews. She attributes the recent increase in cases of bulimia to the pressure in society for women to be thin, and the stress caused



'Those who are anorexic or bulimic for a long time without detection suffer guilt, depression and low self-esteem leading to psychological damage'

by the changing role of women in society.

Andrews says it all began with Twiggy, "the new skinny woman." Twiggy, the gaunt guru of the fashion industry in the 1960's, was the first of the super skinny models who have since become the norm in the modelling business. At the same time, Playboy models began to get thinner. While the weight of the average Playboy centrefold has dropped significantly in the past twenty years, the size of the average North American woman has increased. Andrews says this disparity between the fantasy and the reality has caused a great deal of stress.

Andrews says women also use food to relieve stress but then feel more stress when they realize they may gain weight. While studying for exams, many students deal with tension by eating pizza or whole bags of chocolate chip cookies. Women with bulimia panic after bingeing and then make themselves vomit. The combined pressure to be thin and to perform well academically may be too much for some women to cope with.

"As women are getting more career-oriented, there's more stress. Bulimia can be a response to that stress," Andrews says.

But she is worried about women at Saint Mary's who suffer from eating disorders but won't join the group. "I know they're out there. I see them," she says. "But they won't come to meetings."

Kelly Pearce, a social work student at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, has the same problem with a self-help group she facilitates. Pearce says many women won't attend meetings because denial is a symptom of the disease. "Most bulimics and anorexics say there isn't a problem except that they're too fat," says Pearce.

The Sudbury group was organized in January 1985 by two social work students at Laurentian when they identified eating disorders as a major problem in their community. With the help of the Canadian Mental Health

Association, the group began holding weekly meetings and trying to inform women about the problem. Pearce decided to act as the group's resource person this year because she was concerned about women at Laurentian.

"You just need to look anywhere on campus to see women jogging frantically or doing aerobics workouts," says Pearce.

Pearce says the group isn't intended to replace professional help. Instead she hopes to provide anorexics and bulimics with a safe environment where they can express themselves to people who understand. She says she wants to help end the myths in society that harm women.

Along with self-induced vomiting, Pearce says bulimics engage in the dangerous practice of dieting combined with aerobic workouts. Aerobics, made popular by Jane Fonda and the 20 Minute Workout show, burn off a great deal of calories in a short period of time. Many women do aerobic exercise strictly in order to lose weight and care little about fitness.

While it may be acceptable to do aerobic workouts for twenty minutes at a time, bulimics may exercise for up to three hours a day. But they do not eat as many calories as they burn off through the regimen of frenzied bouts of aerobics. Fonda, author of the Jane Fonda Workout book, and subsequent spinoffs, was herself a bulimic.

Once seen as "fringe" diseases associated with rich, female adolescents, the twin eating disorders are now at the center of attention in the medical community. Three medical conferences, all held in Ottawa last summer, dealt with the increase in cases of bulimia and anorexia nervosa. The Canadian Medical Association along with the Canadian Dietetic Association and the Canadian Pediatric Society heard testimony from doctors about the growing number of cases, the possible causes and the methods of treatment.

Doctors in B.C. are gaining awareness of

eating disorders as the B.C. Medical Association's nutrition committee has formed a sub-committee just to deal with eating disorders.

And at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., psychology student Sylvie Boulet and film student Michael Doherty produced a video about bulimia to educate university students. The video, *Bulimia — Out of Control Eating*, presents a detailed account of a case of bulimia and includes interviews with professionals. Boulet also plans to start a discussion group at S.F.U.

But unless awareness about eating disorders increases soon, Doherty and Boulet may be showing their video to elementary school students as well as university students.

According to Dr. Suji Lena, a pediatrician at the Eastern Ontario Children's Hospital in Ottawa, the average age of anorexic patients is decreasing. For the first time doctors are seeing children as young as 12 with anorexia nervosa. When Lena worked at the Children's Hospital in Toronto last year, her clinic saw 12 cases of anorexic children in six months. The year before, there had only been two or three cases.

She says the symptoms usually begin at the onset of puberty. As children now mature at an earlier age, symptoms of anorexia are also appearing at an earlier age. Lena says children see positive images of skinny people everywhere. Young girls also watch their mothers complain about gaining weight and as a result see their own weight gain as a negative experience.

When female children begin to have breasts develop and wider hips, they begin to panic, says Lena. They want to stay child-like and so they stop eating.

"The younger age group isn't as sophisticated," says Lena. "They don't make themselves vomit or anything like that. They just skip meals or stop eating altogether."

The increasing numbers of women and even young female children obsessed with weight is a warning sign of the way North American society works. While fashion magazines and pornography display images of thin women in standard shapes and sizes, real women are risking their lives to live up to the stereotype. To stop that trend, men must begin to question the vision of beauty that the media is trying to display. Women must begin to love their bodies whatever its size.

Feminist cartoonist Nicole Hollander makes the point well. Her main character Sylvia is asked what world without men would be like. She replies: "No crime. Lots of fat, happy women."