

Leveson Inquiry

This statement is submitted by Beat (charity number 801343). Beat is the only national charity supporting the 1.6million people in the UK affected by eating disorders and campaigning on their behalf. Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses with the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric condition. 20% of people seriously affected can die prematurely, either from the physical consequences of severe emaciation or else from suicide. Girls and young women aged 12-20 are most at risk.

The media has a constant interest in the topic of eating disorders, and we have welcomed a noted recent increase in accurate and compassionate reporting. However, there remains one substantial area where the print media in particular is at risk of causing direct harm to vulnerable people and that is in the use of images of severely emaciated bodies to portray eating disorders.

While the media by itself does not directly cause eating disorders, these images have a particularly harmful effect on those at risk, a harm that the media could act to remove. Anorexia nervosa is a very challenging illness to treat. The person affected can find it very difficult to believe that they are ill, and be extremely reluctant to accept treatment even when they do. The illness itself affects your thinking and distorts your view of your body - at the same time as driving you to control your size and shape in extreme, dangerous ways.

Images of emaciated bodies can have two direct effects. A person with anorexia who feels grossly fat even though emaciated will compare themselves to the portrayed image of extreme thinness illustrating a media story of eating disorders and it will reinforce their distorted perception that there is nothing wrong with them because they don't look like that. The distorted body image only affects how they evaluate their own size and shape - not that of others which can be judged accurately.

The second effect is to fuel the dangerously competitive nature of the illness, so that someone strives to become even thinner than the pictures they see - in order to be the 'perfect anorexic'.

The Editor's Code already contains clear guidelines on the reporting of suicide which states:-

"When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used."

We are calling for the Code to recognise that showing pictures of severe emaciation is as dangerous as telling people what the fatal dose of paracetamol is. We suggest the following wording:-

"images used to illustrate cases of eating disorders should not include those showing skeletal emaciation"

We have produced media guidelines on reporting eating disorders, and engage directly with the press on this matter. Most are responsible and willing to try to understand the complex issue. Some are not, and continue to print dangerous images despite our best efforts to warn them of the impact. We have come to the view that regulation is the only avenue left and respectfully request that the Leveson Inquiry considers our concerns.

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signe



SUSAN RINGWOOD
Chief Executive, Beat

Date

31st Jan 2012