



September 9, 2024

Eating Disorders Alliance (EDA) says school nurses weighing children will create more harm than good

The Eating Disorders Alliance (EDA) has expressed significant concerns over recent advice published by the Australian College of Nursing (ACN) regarding the “normalisation of collection and discussion of height and weight data of all children” that encourages nurse-led interventions at a school level to combat childhood obesity.

EDA, the alliance of major eating disorder organisations in Australia and New Zealand, is concerned that this advice will exacerbate weight stigma, encourage disordered eating and foster body dissatisfaction – key risk factors in the development of an eating disorder.

Shaming people for their weight does not result in increased health behaviours or weight loss¹, and experiencing weight stigma can lead to adverse health consequences, such as binge eating, increased food consumption, avoidance of physical activity, physiological stress, weight gain, and impaired weight loss outcomes.²

Eating disorders in young people aged 10-19 have increased by 86% since 2012³, and research and lived experience insights consistently underscore the damaging impact of being weighed at school.

Butterfly Foundation CEO, Dr Jim Hungerford, said, “Butterfly frequently hears from our lived experience community that health promotion and strategies that take a weight-centric approach do not result in “reduced stigma” – it reinforces it. Preventative health policy must align with eating disorder prevention, and we must broaden our definition of health to beyond a weight-centric, diet culture lens.”

Eating Disorders Queensland CEO Belinda Chelius highlighted that ‘healthy weight’ messaging is problematic, as it medicalises body size based on Body Mass Index (BMI), an outdated

¹ Tomiyama, A., Carr, D., Granberg, E. et al. How and why weight stigma drives the obesity ‘epidemic’ and harms health. *BMC Med* 16, 123 (2018). Accessed online: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-018-1116-5>

² Puhl, R. Suh, Y. 2015. Health Consequences of Weight Stigma: Implications for Obesity Prevention and Treatment. *Obesity Prevention*. Vol 4. 182-190 (2015). Accessed online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13679-015-0153-z>

³ Butterfly Foundation, Paying the Price 2024

measure, saying “Placing emphasis on weight control/reduction in health messaging has been shown to promote disordered eating behaviours, reduce physical activity, and discourage health behaviours.”

Eating Disorders Victoria CEO Belinda Caldwell agreed, “Young people deserve healthcare that helps, not harms. Focusing on a number on the scales goes against everything we know about recovery. The ACN has an opportunity here to follow the evidence and consult with people with lived experience of eating disorders.”

Eating Disorders Families Australia Director Jane Rowan also highlighted recent curriculum changes that are not aligned with the advice from the Australian College of Nursing, saying, “Over 340 references to Body Mass Index (BMI), weight, calories, healthier, class surveys, food and diet were removed or replaced from the Australian Curriculum in November 2023. It is disappointing to see a step backwards recommended.”

ANZAED CEO Jade Gooding added, “school-based nurses play a pivotal in enhancing the broader healthcare system, however it’s crucial to understand that focusing solely on weight does not improve health outcomes, instead, targeted prevention and early intervention will highlight that eating disorders can affect individuals of any age, gender, and body size.”

EDA welcomes the opportunity to work with the Australian College of Nursing to better develop their position statements to ensure a safer, more inclusive approach to health and wellbeing that is informed by lived experience and does not focus on weight.

EDA also recommends any information that people receive about health, food, minds and bodies follows the National Eating Disorder Collaboration’s [‘Eating Disorder Safe Principles’](#) to help minimise unintended risks and harms in relation to eating disorders, disordered eating and body dissatisfaction.

EDA comprises Butterfly Foundation, Eating Disorders Families Australia, the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Eating Disorders, Eating Disorders Queensland, Eating Disorders Victoria, and The Eating Disorders Association of New Zealand.

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Members of the EDA and people with lived experience of an eating disorder are available for interview on request.

Editor and producers note

Please include the following support line details in all media coverage of this story and refer to the [Mindframe Media guidelines](#) for safe reporting on eating disorders.

Anyone needing support with eating disorders or body image issues is encouraged to contact:
Butterfly National Helpline on 1800 33 4673 (1800 ED HOPE) or support@butterfly.org.au
Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline on 1300 550 23
Eating Disorders Association New Zealand 0800 233 269 (0800 2 EDANZ) or info@ed.org.nz

For urgent support call Lifeline 13 11 14