

National strategy on body image doesn't go far enough

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We didn't need Karl Lagerfeld's recent "nobody wants to see curvy women" clanger to highlight the urgent need for action on body image dissatisfaction. About one in 100 adolescent girls develops anorexia, the third most common chronic illness within that group in Australia. About one in five students suffer bulimia nervosa and up to 19 per cent of these young Australians will die from the condition. The proposed National Strategy on Body Image released this week is a welcome step forward. But it doesn't go nearly far enough. The strategy adopts a broad approach that recognises the important role of schools, tertiary institutions, families and community organisations in addressing body image dissatisfaction.

But from the outset, the advisory group's terms of reference were focused on government working in partnership with the media, fashion and advertising industries. The chairwoman of the National Body Image Advisory Group, Mia Freedman, has called on the industries to use their "power for good" and "portray a more realistic, attainable and diverse image of women and men". Noble aspirations. But how realistic are they?

At the heart of the proposed strategy is an Industry Voluntary Code of Conduct with guidance on the responsible portrayal of body image. The code articulates some worthy principles: broadening our cultural ideals of beauty to include models of different ethnicities and sizes; communicating the holistic value of people; and the importance of being healthy above body shape.

The problem with a voluntary code is that it's, well, voluntary. Body angst is good for business. If we apply that face cream, enhance our hair colour, cover that pimple, invest in a weight loss program, buy those jeans and get a fake tan, happiness will be ours. The bonus is that corporate profits are also boosted. Mia Freedman's cheerful confidence in corporate social responsibility can't hide the glaring contradiction of asking industries that trade on our insecurities about physical appearance, sexual attractiveness and an idealised lifestyle to self-regulate their portrayal of "positive" and "realistic" body images.

It's true, as Freedman highlighted yesterday, that looking at images of underweight people does not directly cause eating disorders. The reasons people develop eating disorders are complex, and every sufferer has a unique experience. But let's not understate the impact that media and advertising has on the health and wellbeing of young women in particular. The evidence is in and it's a challenge to the proposed code's optimistic reliance on the goodwill of industry. Research shows that among teenage girls, looking at pictures of thin, idealised models is likely to cause higher levels of depression, anxiety and anger and may contribute to the onset of disordered eating and increased risk of self harm.

The proposed national strategy misses another point. Body image dissatisfaction is not limited to dissatisfaction about body size. Many of the causes of body image dissatisfaction are linked to a broader cultural phenomenon: the sexualisation and objectification of women. On billboards, in magazines and popular media sexualised images of women in particular send a pervasive message that a person's worth comes only from his or her sexual appeal or

behaviour. Women with a particular “look” are displayed as the most valuable kind of woman. She’s successful because men want her. Research shows that over time women can come to see themselves as objects and subject their bodies to constant surveillance, feeling disgusted and ashamed about themselves. So even if the code helps industry to get serious about presenting more realistically sized women, the expectation to be “hot” and “sexy” will remain. And industry will have the right product and the latest look we need to achieve this false ideal.

The advisory group’s recommendation that the Australian Government monitor support for the code across industries to determine its effectiveness is welcomed. But the code highlights the broader failures of Australia’s system of self-regulation of the advertising and media industries. Our system is overly reliant on motivated members of the public successfully negotiating the myriad codes and standards to make a complaint. Wanting to “promote the positive”, the advisory committee has adopted the “carrot” approach to self-regulation. Businesses who demonstrate leadership in tackling body image issues will be publicly rewarded. But a robust regulatory system needs the “sticks” as well. What about those businesses who don’t adhere to the code? There are no penalties so there are no disincentives to producing harmful material.

The “compare and despair” game is a serious health threat to young Australians. The strategy foreshadows that if there is broad industry failure to comply with positive body image practices, government should reconsider the voluntary nature of the code. This could prove too little too late for those most at risk.

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