

INQUIRY

At 13, she stopped eating. She wasted to skin, bone. When she fell to 38kg she was finally, officially diagnosed: anorexic.

The Ministry of Health suggests one in 20 women may have an eating disorder.

So why doesn't the Auckland health system have any beds for them?

Why is it sending patients – and their families – to Sydney for three months, at \$67,000 a time?

starved for choices

by Valerie Schuler

When Joseph's 13-year-old niece suddenly stopped eating, it threw the whole family into turmoil. Before their eyes the once-healthy, athletic teenager wasted to skin and bone.

Her school performance plummeted. She attempted suicide. But it wasn't until she weighed 38kg and stopped menstruating that she was officially diagnosed with anorexia. Finally, she qualified for treatment.

Joseph* says his family had to fight "like hell, every step of the way" to get counselling for the troubled teenager at the Kari Centre at Greenlane Clinic, where the Auckland District Health Board's outpatient and day-stay services are based.

In-patient care wasn't an option. There is none in Auckland.

There is none in the North Island. New Zealand has only seven publicly funded hospital beds for people with eating disorders. All are at Princess Margaret Hospital in Christchurch and are not available to people who live in the North Island.

For Aucklanders, the only publicly funded option is a private hospital in Sydney. And not everyone qualifies for the trip across the Tasman — it's a last resort for the worst cases, deemed worthy after a psychological assessment.

Joseph says it's not good enough. "Auckland is extraordinarily unequipped to deal with eating disorders. It's disgusting and nobody is taking responsibility."

HE WON'T get any argument from Maree Burns, of the non-profit organisation Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN). She says there is a huge gap in the services available.

"People have to be really unwell to get district health board-funded treatment. Lots of people don't fit the clinical diagnosis but are extremely unwell."

Only those at the "tip of the clinical iceberg" qualify for in-patient care. Many are turned away, told they are not "sick enough".

Ministry of Health documents say about 5 per cent of women registered with a GP have an eating disorder. Using its figures that could be a staggering 34,355 women across the region.

Ms Burns — an eating disorder survivor — says numbers could be higher.

Establishing exactly how many people are affected by anorexia or bulimia is difficult. By their nature, eating disorders are often hidden and many sufferers aren't clinically diagnosed.

Each year, up to eight acute Auckland patients are sent to Sydney for an average of three months. The Auckland District Health Board — which coordinates eating disorder treatment for itself, the Counties Manukau and Waitemata boards — pays for them and their families to make the trip.

Total cost of sending someone to Sydney: about \$67,000.

Ms Burns says the treatment is very good but going to Australia uproots a whole family.

"It can be extremely stressful and, when they come back to Auckland, they may not receive the same level of outpatient care."

WHAT ABOUT private treatment? Yes, there's help for some who can afford to pay but, again, these are not available to everybody.

The only private option is Ashburn Clinic in Dunedin. Treatment is expensive and the clinic does not treat children or adolescents.

In Auckland, there's Mercy Ministries, a US-founded, not-for-profit Christian organisation. Its Albany centre opened last year, offering a six-month live-in programme for young women who are "desperate to conquer life-controlling issues", and those with eating disorders.

Numbers are limited to about eight at any one time. Applicants are chosen on individual merit — according to the ministry's criteria.

"It is essential that the girls entering the programme want to change and work through the issues they are facing," says director Ketty Petrie. "This is a significant factor when choosing who to accept."

The Auckland board admits the



THE NUMBERS

5 per cent of women registered with a GP have an eating disorder
8 maximum number of Aucklanders sent to Sydney each year
\$67,000 cost of sending 1 patient to Sydney
\$0 District Health Board funding for Eating Difficulties Education Network

situation is not ideal. But spokesperson Ben Peck says it is not "clinically or economically sensible to develop an inpatient unit for the Auckland population only."

SO WHAT does the future hold? Following a Ministry of Health review last year, a national framework, Future Directions for Eating Disorders Services in New Zealand, was released. Each district health board was asked to provide a plan.

The Auckland board has been working with others in the region to come up with the northern plan. It went to the Ministry for review last month.

There are also talks about specialist inpatient beds for the North Island. But these are long-term, nothing is concrete.

Ms Burns is pleased problems are being addressed. But she says Auckland needs more community-based preventative services to stop people getting to the critical stages.

EDEN applied for health board funds last year but was turned down because its services are not considered a priority.

Its Westmere centre, opened in 1990, scrapes by on grants from charitable trusts and corporate donations. It has only four part-time staff to deal with thousands of requests for help each year.

Counselling and educational services used to be free. But in the past year, the centre has had to start charging.

"We charge on a sliding scale and well below the cost of private counselling," says Ms Burns. "But having to pay can be

FOR HELP

Need help or advice on eating disorders? Contact: EDEN, ph (09) 378 9039 or email info@eden.org.nz

October 15 is the third annual Love Your Body Day. EDEN is holding a T-shirt design competition. The winning design will be sold throughout New Zealand to raise money for the organisation. Entries close July 21. See www.eden.org.nz

off-putting for some people."

She says the health board is pumping money into clinical services rather than early intervention.

"There's a huge gap and it's an inadequate response."

The board says it hopes an agreed regional plan will begin to address some of the gaps. Exact plans and budgets won't be disclosed until after the Ministry review.

"We've got our fingers crossed," sighs Ms Burns.

In the meantime, the health board continues to clock up frequent flyer miles. Across Auckland, hundreds of sufferers and their families find what help they can.

* Name withheld to protect family privacy