

Hospital forms eating disorders center

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

IN RECENT YEARS, eating disorders have increasingly become food for thought. Researchers have found it's a person's pathological view of eating that can lead to anorexia, bulimia and obesity.

The Eating Disorders Recovery Center which recently opened at St. Mary Hospital in Livonia deals with such eating disorders.

"As alcoholism and drug abuse were 15 years ago, eating disorders are today in terms of awareness," said Phil O'Dwyer, who heads up the EDRC at St. Mary. "These are treatable conditions."

The following eating disorders are the most common:

- Bulimia is binge eating followed by purging of food. Purging can be done with laxatives, vomiting, excessive exercise or fasting.

- Anorexia is a continual starvation. A person will not eat, believing they are overweight. Death can result.
- Obesity is usually the result of compulsive overeating. Food becomes an addiction.

THE COMPARISON drawn between eating disorders and chemical addictions is well founded. Treatment for both are similar.

O'Dwyer, for example, is also president of Brookfield Clinic, a substance abuse program at St. Mary and Garden City Osteopathic hospitals.

Children of alcoholics, in fact, account for a high percentage of people with eating disorders. Females account for a high percentage of those with disorders.

O'Dwyer said the new clinic at St. Mary focuses on all the variables involved. One thing he's quick to add, though, is that the EDRC is not a fat farm.

"Diets do not work," O'Dwyer said. "We know that. The patients who come in here remind us of that every day. Some of them are authorities on diets and know every one that's been established."

Treatment at the EDRC steers clear of weigh-ins and calorie intake. Instead, the treatment focuses on a person's relationship with food.

Counseling, education and a support group are involved.

"THAT'S WHERE the comparison with alcoholism

really stands out," he said. "Some 30 years ago, we didn't understand alcoholism as a disease. It was thought you could tell a person, 'You've got a drinking problem. Now all you have to do is stop.'"

"We don't say to a person with an eating disorder, 'All you have to do is get away from the table.'"

Treatment at the EDRC is a bit more extensive than that. Patients attend three nights a week for three-hour sessions.

The program lasts 12 weeks, making it one of the most structured in Michigan, according to O'Dwyer.

Cost can range from \$1,700 to \$1,800 for the entire 12 weeks. Many insurance companies cover the program.

But an eating disorder has more than a monetary cost.

Someone with anorexia, bulimia or obesity usually feels alienated. A person's self-esteem is at a low ebb.

AS A PERSON becomes more withdrawn, the disorder is magnified.

In many cases, O'Dwyer pointed out, families and friends don't realize what is happening.

"The shame and guilt with bulimia or anorexia... maintaining relationships can become difficult," he said. "In our program, we evaluate that also."

Free information sessions are offered regularly at the EDRC. For those who are interested further, there is an intake session where the eating disorder is assessed.

In some cases, such as anorexia, hospitalization is required.

The EDRC is modeled after a clinic near Cincinnati, operated by Dr. Barbara MacFarland, who is an alcoholic treatment counselor.

The center at St. Mary, which opened in mid-April, has received a tremendous response, O'Dwyer said.

"When we put in an ad in the paper we must have received over 300 calls," O'Dwyer said. "The community response would suggest there is a need for something like this."

For more information on the Eating Disorders Recovery Center at St. Mary Hospital, call 464-4800, Ext. 2436.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Phil O'Dwyer heads up the new Eating Disorders Recovery Clinic in St. Mary Hospital.

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