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Families plead for anorexia help

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Families of young people battling anorexia have called for a government inquiry into the inadequacy of treatment options in Australia.

The move comes as a private facility in Australia plans to open a second clinic to meet overwhelming demand and a Sydney school launches a "resilience" program to stave off eating disorders among children as young as primary-school age.

The Mandometer Clinic in Melbourne is affiliated with Swedish facility the Karolinska Institute, which claims to have a 75 per cent success rate treating patients with eating disorders.

The Swedish institute is fully government-funded, but in Australia the existing clinic - which provides outpatient care only - receives no public funding. A second clinic providing inpatient treatment is scheduled to open in Melbourne later this month. However, families will still bear the full cost, with only limited support from some private health funds.

A mother of a recovering anorexic wrote to *The Sun-Herald* after reading of the death of 20-year-old Sydney woman Catena Di Mauro, who died from anorexia in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital on February 7.

The woman, who asked not to be named, feared her own daughter's death following a stint at Westmead Children's Hospital in September 2003 that she said only caused the girl's condition to deteriorate.

"I call [the hospital] the Anorexic University," said the woman. "She came out with all these really entrenched habits. It becomes a competition [among patients] as to who could become the thinnest. She would spend the whole afternoon walking really quickly around the hospital."

By the time they took the girl out of hospital at Christmas, her weight had plummeted to 30 kilograms. The family then tried home-based therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy for the next two years, which they found ineffective.

When they found the girl, then aged 16, perched on her second-storey windowsill with a noose around her neck, they decided to take her to Sweden.

Four months later, at a cost of up to \$2000 a day, the girl was in "partial remission" and able to return to Australia.

The girl's parents had been lobbying former NSW health minister Reba Meagher last year to re-evaluate the treatment of anorexia, to no avail. A spokesman for the current Health Minister, John Della Bosca, told *The Sun-Herald* the minister would "be happy to ask NSW Health to examine the treatments that [the parents] are advocating".

St Andrew's Cathedral School in Sydney will launch a preventative three- to five-year program in collaboration with eating disorders group Butterfly Foundation from September.

The head of the middle school, Reverend Tim Bowden, said children from primary level would be educated on issues such as media literacy to avoid becoming "sucked into the eating disorder black hole".

Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, with 500 cases diagnosed in NSW every year, one in five resulting in death.

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