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Why the Anna Westin Act of 2015 matters

By Annetta Ramsay

Eating disorders legislation has just been introduced with bipartisan sponsorship for the first time in over a decade. The Anna Westin Act of 2015 was introduced by Reps. Ted Duetch (D-Fla.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.).

Anna Westin took her own life on a snowy morning, in February 2000, as a result of her ongoing battle with anorexia.

Westin would be remembered for her generous spirit, for her volunteer work, and as a girl who once spent 15 minutes wrestling a huge fish out of a tiny lake. She was a fighter who ultimately lost her own battle.

Kitty and Mark Westin knew their daughter's anorexia returned during her sophomore year of college. Anna's doctor recommended immediate hospitalization due to her 34 percent body weight loss, but the insurance company told them to take her home, saying treatment wasn't medically necessary. The Westins were prepared to pay for the expensive care Anna needed, but the insurance denial allowed her to seize the opportunity to participate in minimal treatment. Those struggling with eating disorders often deny the extent of their illness.

Following their daughter's death, the Westins fought and won a lawsuit against their insurance company. Their openness about Anna's life and death gave a face to eating disorders.

For the past 30 years, I have specialized in the treatment of eating disorders, and I have participated in a growing understanding of how to treat these deadly illnesses. Despite the availability of more effective treatment, insurance coverage has gotten worse for eating disorders.

People can and do recover from eating disorders, but they usually need specialized treatment.

I had a patient whose insurance company refused to cover the care she needed despite my spending hours on the telephone requesting coverage. The same insurance company wasn't helpful when she developed mouth cancer related to the diabetes that triggered her eating disorder. She reported her oncologist reassured her she had a 98 percent chance of surviving, but she told me she feared her long battle with anorexia compromised her immune system. Two years later, she died. Sadly, I have seen two other patients lose their lives to eating disorders, and inadequate insurance coverage was a factor in all three deaths.

Eating disorders are deadly killers that deserve appropriate care and coverage.

Insurance companies need to know that eating disorders are the most deadly mental illness, claiming the lives of up to 20 percent of those who suffer. Suicide is the **second leading cause of death**, after cardiac disease, among women with anorexia.

Depression often drives eating disorders, and it is difficult to fight because of inadequate nutrition. The cycle of disordered eating and depression makes suicide a constant threat.

Shortly after Westin's death, research uncovered the biological component of eating illnesses. While biology isn't destiny, we now understand the **chromosomal link that predisposes** individuals to eating disorders. Eating disorders are brain illnesses, but Westin's insurance company refused to call anorexia an illness.

The Mental Health Parity Act, passed in 2008, was meant to provide care for mental health issues on par with primary medical issues. Unfortunately, eating disorders were not specifically mentioned in the Act. According to the Eating Disorders Coalition (EDC), eating disorder specialists and treatment centers report insurance coverage is now worse than previously reported.

The Anna Westin Act, if passed, will clarify the Mental Health Parity Act, and make sure that treatment for all disorders, including eating disorders, receive equal treatment with other health issues. The act also provides training and research into advertising practices like photo shopping. Health professionals and teachers can spot eating disorders early, when they are easier and less expensive to treat.

Best of all, the funding for this act already exists. No additional funds will be needed to enact the Anna Westin Act.

The Washington-based EDC has worked for over a decade to change the law so that people will get the care they need. Several factors indicate this could be the year it happens: First, the focus is on heartbreaking stories like Anna Westin's. Second, the community supporting the 14.5 million people who suffer from eating disorders is more energized than ever. Third, this bill already has bi-partisan support.

The Anna Westin Act of 2015 matters because Anna Westin matters, and because each person struggling with an eating disorder matters.

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