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# Epidemic of Teens Desperate to Be Thin

By Anthony Faiola
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BUENOS AIRES — It is lunchtime al the overflowing Hospital for Anorexia and Bulimia here, and hundreds of thin teenage girls cluster around lows of makeshift dinning tables set up in the halls of this compound, where scales are forbidden and sizes are torn from all clothing. Drawn faces look up nervously from plates of meat and rice. Patients here must eat five limes a day, which is not always easy for the new ones, more than 70 of whom arrive each week.

The patients are part of an extraordinary problem in Argentina, where a pathology of thinness is sickening young girls al an alarming rate.

In a land renowned for the steak-loving gaucho, !he rate of anorexia and bulimia — also known here as fashion-model syndrome — is three times higher than in the United Stales and possibly the highest in the world, mental health specialists say.

Almost one in every 10 Argentine teenage girls has clinical anorexia or bulimia, according to a recent study. Local media are calling it a problem of "epidemic proportions."

Reports of girls passing out in school from self-starvation are increasing, and the government is considering state-sponsored prevention programs.

Local health experts blame the problem on *a* remarkable obsession with thinness and model culture that far exceeds even the weight-conscious societies in the United Stales and Europe. And, they say, there is a uniquely Argentine struggle with self-image and personal identity; in Buenos Aires, it is said, more people undergo psychoanalysis per capita than anywhere on Earth.

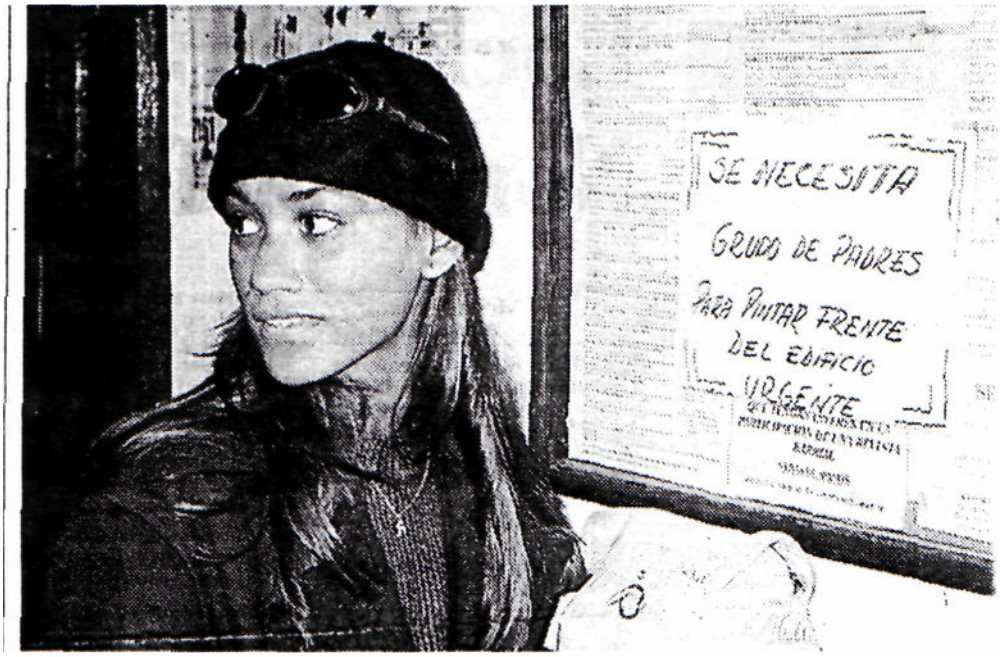
"Our culture is a disaster when it comes to self-image." said **Pablo Chapur**. a psychologist with the Association Against Bulimia and Anorexia here. "In the Stales, there is a dose of individuality. But here, the pressure to be thin like a model has become overwhelming."

"Look around the streets of Buenos Aires." he said. "The women are all sticks." said **Pablo Chapur**

Since the days before Eva Peron, the much revered onetime first lady, the Argentine woman has prized thinness. In the fashionable shops of Barrio Norte, an upscale district of Buenos Aires, women's clothes tend to be cut one or two sizes smaller than their European or American counterparts, increasing the burden on the local woman to maintain a slender figure. Near the open-air park of the tony Recoleta neighborhood, strikingly thin, long-legged models — and model look-alikes — sport black sunglasses and light-fitting leggings while dragging on long-stemmed cigarettes in local cafés.

But lately, the thinness culture here has intensified. The mass media and advertising booms since economic reforms in 1991 have increased the visibility of waif-thin models, who have become idols for millions. In addition, a number of Argentine models — including Valeria Mazza and Raquel Mancini — have broken into the international big leagues, catwalking for Armani and Chanel and appearing on the cover of Vogue.

This has taken the fascination girls here have with the world of glamour and modeling to a new level.




***Viviana Mancuso, 18, a patient at the Hospital for Anorexia and Bulimia in Aires. One in 10 Argentine teenage girls suffers from the maladies, a study found.***

"You don't find many Argentine girls aspiring to be lawyers or doctors these days," said Javier Luquez. a fashion entertainment industry agent.

"They all want lo be models, to be part of this glamorous life they see in magazines."

Demand for cosmetic surgery is skyrocketing.

Indeed. Argentina's leading supermodel. Miss Mancin, lapsed into a coma of several days in December after undergoing liposuction on her already tiny frame. Last year. Argentine consumers spent $20 million on weight-loss products, according to La Nacion newspaper. In the commercial and middle- and upper-class sectors of Buenos Aires, gymnasiums and health clubs are proliferating.

SOME say the Argentine woman does it for the Argentine man. Others say it is a competition between women to see who can be the most thin or beautiful — in Buenos Aires, the words for thin and beautiful are used interchangeably.

"A thin woman is just more elegant than a fat woman." said Graciela Naum, a local fashion designer. "A woman who looks thin, who looks good, is more pleasing company, whether for a man or a woman."

The pressure for Maria Belen, 18, became too much after a former boyfriend called her "fatso" in front of her friends. She recently sat in a small room at the hospital here, fidgeting in a large chair as she talked about wrapping nylon stockings and plastic bags around her body to increase perspiration. Over the course of a month, she said, she virtually stopped eating. Her cheeks became sunken; bones protruded from her ribs and hips. In two months, black patches began forming under her eyes from malnutrition. She stopped menstruating and cried at the sight of food. "After three months people began asking if I had AIDS; I was so glad then, "she said, "I thought, that means I'm as thin as a model now. Now I'm beautiful."

Maria Sol. 17 a bulimic from a middle-class Argentine family, was brought to the hospital two years ago after losing almost 13 kilograms (30 pounds) in three months.

"I didn't fit in the mirror." said Miss Sol, an honor student who had won a scholarship to a top university here before her parents checked her into the hospital "I just needed to be thinner, always. I needed to look like a model. I had to look like one."

Certainly, there arc often pathologies particular to each child that can bring on the most severe cases of anorexia and bulimia, said Elisabeth Goode de Gama. 88, considered one of the mothers of Argentine child psychoanalysis. However, she said, the "model culture" worshiped in Argentina plays a significant role

"Whenever you idolize something, you magnify it." said Ms. Goode de Garma. "We don't want to culturally identify with the rest of Latin America, so we fixate on some elements of European and U.S. societies — like thinness and fashion — and take them very, very seriously."

Those sentiments seemingly have deep roots here, and the cases of men coming down with eating

disorders also arc rising markedly. Although their numbers remain relatively small at the present, at the Hospital for Anorexia and Bulimia the percentage of male patients has increased from 5 percent five years ago to 12 percent today.

“I has a sense that unless I was totally thin, my friends would tease me, or I wouldn’t get a girlfriend,” said Martin, 18, who gave only his first name. He was committed to the hospital three months ago when his situation grew so serious that he feared swallowing because he believed "my saliva had too many calories."

"You've got to be thin here," he said. "You've just got to be thin."