



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

## Eaten up by the body beautiful curse

In all probability the most rewarding facet of being a broadcaster is when people who follow the show contribute ideas, an indication that they engage with the programme and not just listen passively.

Even though radio is a form of media thought to interest people from the ages of 35 upwards, for these six or seven years that I have been producing and presenting *Għandi xi Nghid* on *Radju Malta*, a great deal of children and adolescents have sent messages many-a-time through their parents, Facebook, Twitter or SMSs recommending issues they would like discussed during the radio show – and I admit I get some remarkable ideas.

The topic I am writing about today in this column is in fact inspired by one of these youngsters. I was so utterly surprised that a 10-year-old was asking me to write about this matter (she even suggested I discuss politics, the environment amongst others) that I thought it needs to be tackled not only in a radio show but also by dedicating this week's article to this theme. In fact Cara Borg Aquilina, this smart, clever and talented youngster conveyed that the time was right to appraise the work that is being done at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek*, in other words, she wanted to know what this place stands for.

Cara brought to mind lovely memories of the long discussions I used to have with His Excellency President Emeritus George Abela who I used to meet regularly. I remember having one of these informal conversations on a warm sunny afternoon. As we chatted over a coffee at the Presidential Kitchen Gardens, out of the blue he turned towards me and asked me what I thought of the idea that MCCF Board sets up a residential service for people with eating disorders. He continued that it would not only be state-of-the-art in terms of architecture but top-notch in the provision of services. Now people who are familiar with Dr Abela

would know that he doesn't shoot from the hip. He would have done his homework thoroughly way before throwing around an idea. In fact before taking this idea forward, that is of having a Centre of Excellence specialising in eating disorders (instead of sending people to be treated in unsuitable institutions), he commissioned a scientific survey on the issue, consulted with all the stakeholders and specialists in this field locally and also went abroad to visit centres that are dealing with this severe condition. *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek*, in record time, was conceptualised, designed and has become a lynchpin in our health, social and mental health services.

In actual fact for the last year this foundation has been providing day and residential services for all the spectrum of eating disorders under the Chairmanship of the internationally acclaimed psychiatrist Anton Grech supported by a board made up of representatives from the Health Department and the MCCF, a model partnership that is having a positive effect. This organisation has worked incessantly not only in terms of treatment but also by creating awareness and attempting to overcome the taboo that encapsulates this condition. This service is completely funded by the State after the infrastructure, restoration of the former Sisters' Quarters at Mtarfa and the equipment was funded by the Malta Community Chest Fund at a cost of around €2.5 million. The standard of this programme is high because of the dedicated staff at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* together with the close clinical collaboration with two centres at the Umbria region, *Centro Francisci Toddi* and *Centro DAI – Città Della Pieve* specialised in this sector.

This is an issue of grand proportions. With the risk of sounding dramatic, eating disorders kill – unless we deal with them. We need to talk candidly on this issue and statistics might help us understand better.

As I sit on the board of *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* I asked the Director of this Foundation, Darleen Zerafa, one of the most unassuming and dedicated people I know in the social sector, to provide me with some data. What she makes available is putting it simply, disquieting.

According to an NSO scientific survey, to which over 2,000 respondents participated, it was found that 0.9% were currently suffering from an eating disorder (circa 3,600 people in real terms) while 2% had suffered from an eating disorder in the past. The figures also indicate that about a third of the people



with eating disorders start struggling with this condition between the ages of 15 and 19 years. The survey also floats up the issue that people with eating disorders are predominantly female. Males with eating disorders make up only 1.2% of the respondents.

The most 'popular' form of eating disorder is binge eating with 57% admitting to it followed by anorexia with 34%. 13% suffered from bulimia. In all, nearly 1% of the population between 16 and 50 years are going through one or more of the three kinds of eating disorder; anorexia, bulimia or binge eating – and 2% have been afflicted sometime in the past. This is no shaggy dog story. *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* was if anything a project that should have taken off years ago. It is estimated that at a given time circa 2,000 people are affected by an eating disorder.

International statistics indicate that an estimated 15% of those with anorexia die!

Some days ago I had this interesting conversation with Jessica Facciola, a 20-year-old woman who went through the programme because she experienced eating disorders first hand. She was struggling with this issue on-and-off from a tender age. In fact, she couldn't take it anymore and decided to

start a residential programme when she was 19 years at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* which she has been doing for over seven months.

No one could give us a better idea of what goes on in the head of someone with anorexia, more than a survivor herself. In fact, I talked at length with Jessica about the challenges she had to face, which weren't a few.

She said that there were moments she would feel all alone and hardly understood. It was a constant battle that was going on in her head. Jessica said that she struggled with being overweight and body dysmorphia. At times she would spend the whole night watching videos of people eating so that she gets the kick of the experience without having to do the eating herself and would also be too tired to eat anyway during the day. At one point before deciding that she needed to take up the residential programme at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* she had lost over 30 kilos in a relatively short period of time.

Jessica told me how the eating disorder started taking over her life. She said that she would spend hours at the supermarket and then at home calculating the number of calorie intake. Now and again she would go to buy clothes and dream of being able

to fit into children-sized garments. In the darkest moments she would even weigh the milk she would drink, calculate eight grammes of cheese to make sure she is clear-cut and go up and down the scales obsessively hoping that she gets a better reading. She said there were times when she would even look up the internet to see how to develop anorexia!

When I asked her what she thinks triggered this condition, she said that even though there were some personal problems she was dealing with she felt that the pressure from the media and what people expected 'her looks to be' were the main reasons for the strain.

Jessica spoke about the pain, the loneliness, the isolation and at times the desperation of having to go through this experience. In fact, people develop eating disorders for a variety of reasons ranging from psychological factors to vulnerable personality characteristics from interpersonal, biological and social to cultural causes. She said that the worse thing about any eating disorder is that it takes away your identity, it pilfers your mind and walks off with everything that matters for 'you'. You no longer think, speak, listen and live freely and that is the moment that you really need to ask for help, to recover and get back on track.

As you read this article, Jessica would have left *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek*. She will be going back to her job, her boyfriend and her family. It is interesting that it was her managers at work who encouraged her to take this intense programme at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* and promised to keep the job for her until she is well-enough to go back – which she did. *Kudos* to these exemplary employers!

Jessica said that she wants to pass on the message 'to young people out there' that in this situation 'we are never alone and that we need to talk more about it'. She says that the treatment programme at *Dar Kenn Għal Sahhitek* is commendable, professional and praiseworthy but it is what people make of this programme that matters most.

Jessica's story is an inspiration to us all and a wake-up call for the hundreds of youngsters struggling with such a disorder. We need professional and school awareness programmes amongst others but what we need most is getting away from this fixation that we are beautiful by other people's standards.

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