

PRESS RELEASE

The Quebec Charter for a Healthy and Diverse Body Image Two and a half years later: study shows it is shaping public perception

Montreal, Thursday, July 5, 2012 - Two and half years since the launch of the groundbreaking Quebec Charter for a Healthy and Diverse Body Image (also known as La Charte quebecoise pour une image corporelle saine et diversifiée, or "La Chic" for short), a new study has been released on how the Charter has affected public awareness of the media's impact on eating disorders. Published in print in the August issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* (and now available in advanced e-publication), this study by Lise Gauvin (Professor in the Department of Social & Preventive Medicine at Université de Montréal and Researcher at the Centre de recherche du CHUM) and Howard Steiger (Chief of the Eating Disorders Program at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute) shines a light on how this initiative is shaping public perception.

Reversing the rising tide of eating disorders is a public health priority. Although many public health actions try to help people reduce the amount of food they eat and make better food choices, some researchers believe that these actions neglect the unhealthy pursuit of thinness and its corresponding unhealthy weight-control practices. The authors also found evidence in the literature indicating that greater exposure to images that promote excessively thin body ideals can lead to maladaptive weight-control practices and disordered eating, especially among teen girls.

To combat the negative media influence on body image, stakeholders from the government, the media, health care institutions, and the fashion industry, following an initiative of the Minister of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women, decided to launch "La Chic". Its goal is to incite organizations and people to pledge to: 1) promote a diversity of body images, including different heights, proportions, and ages; 2) encourage healthy eating and weight-control habits; 3) discourage excessive weight-control practices or appearance modification; 4) refuse to subscribe to esthetic ideals based on extreme thinness; 5) remain vigilant and diligent so as to minimize the risks of anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Unique in its approach, La Chic has achieved the voluntary engagement of many important Quebec industries that can favourably influence body-image ideals circulating in the public space. It has achieved sizeable international recognition among groups concerned with eating disorders and the health risks associated with excessive dieting or weight-control practices.

Results

Lise Gauvin and Howard Steiger explored the potential of La Chic in overcoming the unhealthy pursuit of thinness by collecting data about its population reach, acceptability, and perceived potential among Quebec adults: "Our study showed that about 1/3 of respondents recognized the Charter. About 2/3 expressed willingness to

personally adhere to the Charter and perceived it as having potential to make people aware of the negative consequences of disordered eating" explained Lise Gauvin.

This study is the first so far to make a systematic empirical analysis of the plausible outcomes of such initiatives. "Our paper shows that a charter aimed at encouraging healthy and diverse body images in the media, created through consensus building and disseminated through accessible media events can reach a key segment of the adult population," Howard Steiger revealed.

Despite the extent to which thinness is entrenched as an ideal in our culture, a significant segment of the population is remarkably open to the idea of a social effort to reduce the pressure to be thin.

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Information and interview requests

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About the Quebec Charter for a Healthy and Diverse Body Image

The Quebec Charter for a Healthy and Diverse Body Image (La Chic) was instigated by Christine St-Pierre, Minister of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women, and aims to reduce media pressure that leads to unhealthy weight-control practices and the excessive pursuit of thinness in the population. Through various public events and a website that has gained over 22,500 signatories, the Charter has become known to a substantial number of Quebecers, and has had an impact internationally, among groups concerned with body-image and weight management as a public health issue.

About the Douglas—www.douglas.qc.ca

The Douglas is a world-class institute, affiliated with McGill University and the World Health Organization, which treats people suffering from mental illness, and offers them hope and cures. Its teams of specialists and researchers continually advance scientific knowledge, integrate it into patient care, and share it with the community to increase awareness and eliminates stigma around mental illness.