

NEWS

Should we regulate too-skinny models? Fashion industry, medical experts are split

By **JENNA CHANDLER** | Orange County Register

March 8, 2016 at 7:15 am

0 COMMENTS

A California lawmaker wants his state to be the first in the U.S. to require fashion models to obtain a doctor's note to prove they are healthy enough to work.

Assemblyman Marc Levine (D-Marin County) is proposing a number of components in a bill introduced last month. Those provisions, say eating disorder specialists, have the potential to protect models who are often pressured to shrink their bodies to dangerous proportions, as well as the susceptible young women who idolize their images in ads and social media.

"It's a good idea. It's a good start. ... There are a lot of eating disorders in the modeling industry; there's no doubt about it," said Dr. Linda Schack, medical director of Torrance Memorial Medical Center's program for teenagers and young adults with eating disorders and who are medically unstable. "It needs to be addressed."

Other countries have rules against ultra-thin models and the use of Photoshop to create unrealistic beauty standards, but so far the U.S. has been reluctant to regulate.

Levine's proposal for a doctor's note mandate, which would be based on three physical exams per year, is one element of Assembly Bill 2539. He also wants to require modeling agencies to classify their models – both men and women – as full-time employees rather than contractors, a switch that would trigger benefits including health insurance, overtime and paid vacation.

To win coveted modeling contracts, many women say they must be at least 5-foot-8, with a 24-inch waist and 34-inch hips – standards that might be achieved healthily by some, but for many others, pose serious risks.

Models, Levine said, are locked into contracts that “dictate the centimeters of their hips.”

'CLOTHES HANGERS'

Some in the fashion industry say the bill unfairly targets models and that three doctor visits is excessive and onerous.

But S. Bryn Austin, a professor of social and behavioral sciences at Harvard University's School of Public Health who helped draft the bill, said the number of visits is a compromise between convenience for models and their safety.

“Eating disorders can have a particularly pernicious affect on bone strength, organ development, cognitive issues. Enormous damage could be done if an eating disorder went unchecked,” she said.

Others oppose government intervention in general, arguing there are alternative avenues for addressing the industry's “too-skinny” problem, while some don't see a problem at all.

Fashion designers demand the type of models they want showcasing their clothes – that's why California Fashion Association president Ilse Metchek and others refer to the models as “clothes hangers.”

“If they wanted (items) to hang on someone fatter, they would put them on someone fatter,” she said.

“Legislation on this issue is ... absolutely unnecessary.”

Indeed, a plus-size clothing line has yet to appear at Orange County Fashion Week.

Since 2005, the biannual OC Fashion Week, which this year is March 13-16, has showcased collections by emerging local designers trying to tap into the county's retail market, where consumers spend nearly \$2,000 on average for apparel each year.

The event's producer, Kathy Marino, said a designer once requested a 5-foot-11, size 0 model. She didn't have a woman in her database with those measurements, but said she does have about 35 – out of 700 available models – who are plus-size, a category that on catwalks starts at women's size 8.

That's enough models to do an entire plus-size show. But Marino is still waiting for a collection to come on board.

PERPETUATING THE PROBLEM

There are many reasons why someone might slip into self-starvation. But there is a strong connection between modeling and eating disorders, which are psychological – and can be deadly.

Seeing images of super-skinny models can trigger eating disorders in people who are predisposed to them, possibly because of genetics and personality traits.

And it's not just a problem for women.

Research is beginning to show a link between young men and magazines, music videos, TV and concerns about muscularity, body hair and athletic ability, said Jerel Calzo, a developmental psychologist who teaches at Harvard University and studies body image and eating disorder risks in males.

For both genders, greater exposure to images of unrealistic bodies in the media leads to greater body dissatisfaction, Calzo said.

Being in the industry can exacerbate the condition.

People with eating disorders are often attracted to modeling because they overvalue appearance and weight – it's a natural draw, said Laura Adams, a registered dietician at Mission Hospital Regional Medical Center, Laguna Beach, who specializes in treating eating disorders.

"The industry itself continues to perpetuate that problem when they're told to go ahead and lose a little bit more body fat or modify for a trendy feature, like the thigh gap," a space between the inner thighs when standing with knees touching, she said.

A MINIMUM BMI?

Exactly what would count as healthy under AB2539 is still to be decided. The bill tasks state officials in charge of workplace safety and public health to create the standards.

France and Israel, where officials were alarmed by emaciated runway models, have adopted standards that include a minimum body mass index, a controversial measurement of body fat based on height and weight but which does not take into account factors such as muscle density and metabolism.

But California isn't known for its runway fashion. The industry is more commercial, where standards for thinness are not as extreme, said Metchek, of the fashion association.

And Los Angeles – which employs more models than any other metropolitan area nationwide – is better known for its celebrities than its top models.

"We have skinny people in the movies. I dare (lawmakers) to try to get them to be fat, or fatter. Did you see the Oscars? Those people were anorexic," Metchek said.

THE HEALTHY WAY

"I put the pressure on myself. Opening a magazine and seeing the top models of the world, you want to look like them," said Caitlin Bozner, a 21-year-old model and University of Redlands student who has walked the runways of OC Fashion Week and was crowned Miss American Teenager in 2012.

Bozner said she sculpts her body to the industry's standard measurements in a healthy way, working out six days a week under the guidance of a trainer.

"I tried quick fixes, they do not work – detox tea, really restrictive diets, crash dieting, juice cleanses. If you want any kind of quick fix, stay away from it," she said.

She prefers education to regulation.

"A lot of these girls don't know they're starving their brains. They're very naive and very trusting," she said.

But Austin, the Harvard professor who helped draft AB2539, argues it's unhealthy for anyone to lose weight unless it's for medical reasons, especially if it's a condition of employment.

The bill, she said, sends a message that, "California is not going to sit by while this industry continues to exploit its workers in ways that amount to near self-starvation."

Contact the writer: jchandler@ocregister.com and @jennakchandler on Twitter

Tags: [health](#)

SPONSORED CONTENT

Challenge: See How Great This Foundation Looks at the End of the Day

By bareMinerals

[bareMinerals](#)

24-hour, full coverage liquid foundation available in 30 shades. Find your perfect match.



Jenna Chandler

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. Although we do not pre-screen comments, we reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.

If you see comments that you find offensive, please use the “Flag as Inappropriate” feature by hovering over the right side of the post, and pulling down on the arrow that appears. Or, contact our editors by emailing moderator@scng.com.

