

# The Boston Globe

## GLOBE EDITORIAL

### Terri Schiavo's affliction

RIVETED BY the personal and political battles over Terri Schiavo's rights to life and death, the country is largely ignoring a chance to act on an underlying issue: eating disorders.

Schiavo was an overweight kid who reportedly wept when she bought clothes, fearful of being teased about her size. After high school she lost weight, dropping from over 200 pounds to 150. When she was 26 she weighed 110 pounds. On Feb. 25, 1990, less than three months after her 26th birthday, she collapsed. Her heart stopped, depriving her brain of oxygen and causing severe physical damage. Doctors say the cause was a chemical imbalance that had been triggered by an eating disorder.

But Congress is not rushing to pass bills to battle eating disorders. Nor is President Bush pointedly waiting to sign such legislation. And protesters who supported Terri Schiavo by taping their mouths shut did not realize the cruel irony of their symbolism.

Eating disorders have gotten attention in the celebrity-focused press with stories about stars battling anorexia. But the news is often about fan support and public appearances.

Missing are hard clinical facts such as those offered by the National Institute of Mental Health, which warns that "people who suffer from eating disorders can experience a wide range of physical health complications, including serious heart conditions and kidney failure which may lead to death."

**Philip Levendusky**, the vice president of new program development at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont says, "Kids don't realize how much of a game of Russian roulette they're playing." He ran through a tragic list of problems related to eating disorders, from bowel disorders to death. He points to sufferers as young as 8 years old and to estimates that 10 to 15 percent of those with anorexia die.

Despite the devastation of the problem, help can be hard to find. In 2000, Beth and Seth Klarman of Brookline, parents of a teenage daughter with an eating disorder, opted to send her to New Orleans because that was the closest site they found with a comprehensive treatment program. This experience prompted them to donate \$2.5 million to McLean to fund the Klarman Eating Disorders Center, where a multidisciplinary team treats women ages 13 to 23.

But victims of eating disorders can be hard to see. They may not recognize or admit that they are ill. Ironically, Terri Schiavo got attention at the end of her life, when she may have needed intervention earlier, when she appeared fine but was struggling with food.

The legacy of Terri Schiavo's death should not merely be about living wills or intrusive laws but about greater public awareness and action to protect people against the ravages of feeling victimized by food.