

# BEHAVIOR

Joel Greenberg reports from Chicago at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association

## The turning point: Ballerinas and diet

Although anorexia nervosa has been recognized clinically for about 300 years, psychiatrists still have trouble defining and placing it within the range of emotional ailments. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the disorder, almost always seen in young women, is characterized by profound weight loss, hyperactivity, disturbed eating practices and abnormalities in endocrine and hypothalamic function.

Anorexia nervosa may be related to any number of psychosocial factors, and recent studies suggest that ballerinas may be susceptible to the problem, or at least a mild form of it. "A significant number of young ballet students exhibited anorexic behavior patterns," report psychiatrists Eugene L. Lowenkopf of the New York Medical Center and Lawrence M. Vincent of New York City. "Although often maintaining weights of 25 to 30 percent below the standards for the general population, many dropped below this at times; and a small percentage reached levels of emaciation requiring medical interventions."

Interviews with student ballerinas "revealed them to be bright and attractive, though guarded, with a diversity of psychological backgrounds," the researchers report. They found that most of the girls exhibited "abnormal ideation about food, body image and maturation; and strong wishes for self-discipline and self-control." They suggest that such girls stop just short of a pathological anorexia condition, but their behavior "may, given sufficient stress, develop into the more classical syndrome."

In another study, researchers at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto examined 112 female dance students. Using various data, including results of the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT), the students were compared with an anorexia nervosa group and with a control group of female university students.

The study "reveals significant differences between the normal control and dance students on the EAT test scores," report David M. Garner and Paul E. Garfinkel. They also report that twenty-eight percent of the dance students had test scores in the range of anorexia nervosa patients; in-depth diagnostic interviews of those girls turned up six cases of primary anorexia nervosa.

"Anorexia nervosa and 'thin fat people' [non-anorexic persons with the psychological characteristics of anorexia] were thus overrepresented in the population of dance students," say Garner and Garfinkel. "... individuals who focus increased interest on body size are at risk to develop anorexia nervosa and related dieting problems, and ... cultural variables may play a significant role in interacting with psychobiological forces in the development of anorexia nervosa in vulnerable adolescents." The findings also suggest, they say, that "anorexic individuals may selectively enter dance schools," or that the high performance expectations of dance may facilitate the development of the syndrome.

## Women M.D.s: Depression and suicide

Disturbing evidence continues to mount suggesting that women physicians are prone to depression and suicide. One recent University of Southern California study estimated that one in 15 female doctors commits suicide at an average age of 47 years. Now psychiatrist Paula Clayton of Washington University in St. Louis reports that more than half of the 141 women M.D.s she surveyed report a history of primary depression. This compares with a 32 percent incidence among the 116 female Ph.D.s Clayton used as a comparison group.

The findings, if unsettling, are consistent with accepted estimates that 10 percent of women with affective disorder die by suicide, says Clayton. The usc study found the female M.D. suicide rate to be twice that for divorced women older than 70—the group previously shown to have the highest suicide rate.

# SCIENCE & SOCIETY

## SAT coaching can help underachievers

Standardized college entrance exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are taken by more than a million students each year. The tests are supposed to gauge abilities, not knowledge. Thus test developers claim coaching will not affect scores. But a study by the Federal Trade Commission's Boston office last September found otherwise. And "since [coaching] can increase scores ... the true predictive value of the standardized tests is suspect," it complained. Coaching can take up to 10 weeks and cost hundreds of dollars.

The study, now discredited by the agency for analytical and design flaws, was revised and released last week. The revision, still weak, confirmed increases—averaging 29.7 points for verbal scores, 19.2 for math—among hundreds of students over three years at one commercial coaching school; those at another showed negligible improvement.

An important improvement in the revised study was the finding of a difference in the students at each school: The first attracted underachievers—those who score lower than would be expected from factors such as class rank and school grades; the second school did not. That leaves open, the report says, whether school B was ineffective or merely demonstrates that only underachievers benefit from coaching.

## Scholarships to babies

Here's a welcome offer for parents who plan early for their child's education. Rochester Institute of Technology will award scholarships of \$1,500 each to the first 150 individuals who meet their requirement: that they be born on June 12, 1979, the institution's 150th birthday. RIT requires that notification together with proof of birth be submitted *in writing* to the institution at: 1 Lomb Memorial Dr., Rochester, N.Y. 14623.

It is difficult to guess how much the scholarship will be worth in tuition by the time winners can apply it, since tuition for the coming academic year is already \$3,495. RIT currently offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in fields such as science, engineering, computer science, arts and photography.

As with any giveaway, there are conditions: The scholarship is valid only between the years 1997 and 2002, and recipients will have to meet RIT's entrance requirements to use it.

## Asbestos hotlines

Asbestos has had its share of notoriety lately. First there were announcements of programs to alert former shipyard workers that they may have unwittingly received harmful exposures to the carcinogen. Then several schools closed, calling attention to the prevalent use of asbestos in the walls and ceilings of public buildings. Most recently, the Consumer Product Safety Commission issued warnings on potential health hazards from asbestos in hair dryers. As a result, many government agencies now offer information and referrals on asbestos problems.

The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, handles general inquiries through a toll-free hotline at (800) 424-9065 (callers in Washington, D.C., dial 554-1404). Besides dispensing literature, the hotline can refer callers to experts in any of EPA's 10 regional offices who can answer specific details, such as how to remove asbestos building materials safely.

But scientists and engineers are likely to find a hotline operating out of the Research Triangle Institute in North Carolina more useful. It specializes in technical problems, such as where to find the nearest laboratory equipped to analyze samples for asbestos, or how to choose from among various detection techniques the one best suited to a particular need. Also toll free, its number is (800) 334-8571, extension 6892.