

## Locational variation in adolescents' concerns over 'body image'

*Susan Quine, Diana Bernard and Michael Booth*

A statewide study of New South Wales (NSW) adolescents' health concerns was conducted in 2001/02.<sup>1</sup> The data on adolescents consisted of 81 focus groups,<sup>2</sup> 56 urban and 22 rural/3 regional areas of NSW. One issue, 'body image', was raised by adolescents in both urban and rural/regional locations, but in twice as many beach (coastal) than inland locations and often expressed in a more extreme way. For example, a 14-year-old girl from a beach location said: *When you walk down the beach in your bikini and you see a girl that looks amazing and this small, you look at yourself and think why can't I look like that. So you go on a diet but it doesn't work and you know the fastest way to lose weight is to make yourself throw up.*

In 'beach cultures' there was also emphasis on needing to spend time at the beach and to be tanned. That concern over body image is greater among adolescents living in coastal locations should not (on reflection) be a surprise given the greater exposure of the body to scrutiny on beaches. However, an extensive

review of the international literature on body image and nutritional status among adolescents and adults<sup>3</sup> did not report any studies that considered beach/inland location as a variable of analysis.

The association between body image and beach location is of interest. To date, health promotion campaigns have concentrated on reducing the risk of skin cancer through exposure to the sun, particularly on beaches. However, our findings suggest that diet and eating disorders associated with concerns over body image may also be more evident among adolescents living in beach locations. There may therefore be a combined negative impact of exposure to the sun and dieting on the health of young people living close to a beach.

This was an exploratory qualitative study and therefore generalisability of the findings cannot be assumed. Nevertheless, the finding suggests that a larger, more structured study, specifically designed to investigate body image by beach/inland location, could be a fruitful area of research pertinent to health promotion intervention.

When location has been included as a variable in state and national studies of health behaviours and outcomes, it has traditionally been based on an urban/rural comparison. Our finding suggests that location based on a coastal/inland comparison may be more relevant to understand certain health behaviours and outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the NSW Health Department, which funded the statewide access study, and our colleagues who worked on that project:<sup>1</sup> Dr Melissa Kang, Professor Tim Usherwood, Dr Garth Alperstein and Professor David Bennett.

## References

1. Booth M, Bernard D, Quine S, Kang M, Usherwood T, Alperstein G, et al. *Access to Health Care Among Australian Adolescents, Phase 1, Final Report*. Sydney (NSW): New South Wales Department of Health; 2002.
2. Quine S. Focus groups. In: Kerr C, Taylor R, Heard G, editors. *Handbook of Public Health Methods*. Sydney (NSW): McGraw-Hill; 1998.
3. Odea JA. Body image and nutritional status among adolescents and adults – a review of the literature. *Aust J Nutr Diet* 1995;52(2):56-67.

## Authors

Susan Quine, School of Public Health, University of Sydney, NSW

Diana Bernard, NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health, The New Children's Hospital, Westmead, NSW

Michael Booth, Discipline of Paediatric and Child Health, University of Sydney, The New Children's Hospital, NSW

## Correspondence

Associate Professor Susan Quine, School of Public Health, Building A27, University of Sydney, NSW 2006.

Tel: (02) 9351 4371; fax: (02) 9649 7420;

e-mail: sueq@health.usyd.edu.au