

From: [Louise Stoward](#)
To: [NCC Submissions](#)
Subject: SUBMISSION
Date: Monday, 2 June 2014 3:00:01 PM

2nd June, 2014

The National Children's Commissioner
Megan Mitchell

Dear Ms Mitchell

I note with interest that your inquiry into child suicide and [self-harm](#) will examine what role the internet and social media sites play in encouraging teenagers and young adults to engage in dangerous practices like "cutting".

I am writing to express my concern in regards to an Australian based 'diet guru' Freelee the Banana Girl who is widely available through YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and private diet support pages. I belong to a support group of mothers and others of children in recovery from eating disorders. As you are probably aware eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have the highest mortality rates of any mental illness, many of these deaths being the result of suicide. Anorexia, in particular, has a mortality rate 12 times higher than any other cause of death in women ages 15 to 24, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

While research indicates a biological basis, the environment 'pulls the trigger' so to speak. We live in a culture where eating disorders thrive because of the messages we're exposed to and social media heightens that exposure amplifying behaviors associated with eating disorders, obsessions, comparisons and competition. Before you would do (the behaviour) in isolation or with a classmate. Now you can log on and see thousands of people are doing.

Freelee is advertised on pro-ana boards as used as thinspo. She also claims regularly that her diet cures anorexia and bulimia, her evidence being a claimed past history of anorexia and bulimia she says she is now free of since adopting her extreme diet lifestyle. This is not evidenced based and is dangerous advice.

As the internet is unregulated gurus like Freelee are free to market such dangerous diets to teens with eating disorders with no consequences. She disregards any request that she use a disclaimer or state clearly that there is no clinical basis for her fruitarian lifestyle. Her income is derived as a partner to YouTube, advertising on Facebook, private coaching and an online e-book.

Her you tube videos and private facebook groups facilitate dangerous and sometimes deadly behaviours by fostering a sense of competition among vulnerable young people. She also runs a secret members only facebook group for the most dedicated followers that runs a continuous and strict and even more dangerous 30 day raw challenge. Many followers do many months back to back

with a sense of pride and competition.

Freelee promotes the 'Thigh Gap' which is well known in pro-anorexia circles as a desired state of thinness. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCWY32-AOLU> She counsels girls online who are express medical symptoms such as loss of periods, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0ptJE79npA> loss of hair, dry skin, along with other complaints that warrant medical advice, being the same symptoms that point to an eating disorder, claiming that these symptoms are perfectly acceptable. In fact no matter how dangerous the symptom Freelee and her followers reassure followers that these complaints are just the body either adjusting to the diet or part of healing and encourage followers to stick to the plan.

Freelee has zero health qualifications, zero nutritional qualifications and steers young women into very dangerous territory of extreme weight loss which is a pathway to eating disorders with her diet advice.

We implore you to investigate this issue. We recently wrote to the [Australian Communications and Media Authority](#), which regulates offensive and illegal online content and they are powerless. This is their reply

“As noted in our previous correspondence, the ACMA does not have the power under Australian law to investigate the online behaviour or activity of individuals. The law provides only for the ACMA to investigate content at specific locations or URLs. Our powers to investigate online content are set out in the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, which states that the ACMA may only assess content against the standards of the National Classification Scheme applicable to films and computer games.

In this instance, we referred the matter of content assessment to the Classification Board. The Board returned a formal finding that the page about which you complained should be accommodated within an M classification, meaning that it is not prohibited under Australian law.

We understand that the views promulgated by those advocating extreme diets, or 'lifestyles' based on anorexia or bulimia may be distressing. However, the factual accuracy or wider social impact of these views cannot be considered by the ACMA when assessing online content. If you wish to explore other avenues of complaint, we suggest that you seek legal advice. Please note that Youtube is hosted in the United States.

The ACMA recommends that people with concerns such as yours report the content directly to the website's administrators. Most social networking sites and online forums have policies outlining certain content that may not be posted by users. Website administrators rely on complaints from other users to identify content that is not permitted, and will usually enable users to 'flag' or 'report' inappropriate posts. Once notified of such content website administrators may take action to remove it.”

This however is easier said than done. Multiple complaints by our counterpart, Mothers (and Others) Against Eating Disorders, (MAED) to You Tube about

Freelee have achieved nothing. With a similar guru based in the United States, TannyRaw, we have had limited success. TannyRaw was documented having counseled a teen online to leave her parents after the said teen had revealed she was recovering from an eating disorder and her parents were against her following her low fat raw vegan diet lifestyle. This resulted in TannyRaw's YouTube channel being shut down for several hours as this article shows.

<https://shine.yahoo.com/healthy-living/why-moms-in-uproar-over--banana-girl---raw-diet-gurus-214504853.html>

But it was then reinstated with only the offending video removed and she continues on as before.

Regulation is way overdue for the internet. Without it dangerous, opportunistic people are claiming to be an Authority on anything and are answerable to no-one. As parents of children with eating disorders we are helpless, as removing all access to the internet is not possible with our school age children requiring such access for school assignments. As these scammers are spread out across all social media including secret groups as well as youtube and web pages we cannot keep our kids safe from such dangerous self appointed gurus. Pro-ana sites promote unscrupulous fruitarian and low fat raw vegan gurus as a pathway to ultimate weight loss. For those in recovery they also gravitate to these sites as gurus claim to have cured their own eating disorders this way.

Children of parents in our group have relapsed after being exposed to such restrictive diets. The community of followers in the private groups operate like a sect, criticizing and shaming those who are struggling or who leave the group. Comments from those who are dissatisfied or who try to warn others to seek medical attention are removed by the administrators. Obsession with diets such as Freelees further alienates sufferers as in order to follow such a restrictive fruit based lifestyle, they are advised to cut contact from those who follow the sad (Standard American Diet) and as such they are unable to socialize normally due to their extreme diet rules. They spend their days online watching youtube videos with their new online community and exercising.

We would be very grateful if you would also consider in your inquiry into the role the internet and social media sites play in encouraging teenagers and young adults to engage in dangerous practices, gurus such as Freelee, whose pro-ana promotion of thigh gaps and hip bones along with her dangerous diet and unqualified and harmful medical advice are responsible for the onset of eating disorders and eating disorder relapse in our vulnerable children. I would love to see more attention and focus given at the national and international levels and a push for serious regulation of such influential sites.

Thank you,

Louise Stoward
International Eating Disorder Action (IEDAction)