"Men who use anabolic steroids may suffer from eating disorders"

So says the Danish academic and critic, Alice Riis Bach. A provocative statement in a world that firmly believes that eating disorders is a female problem but Alice Riis Bach has reached her conclusion after researching for her recent book “Men and muscles. A book about fitness training and anabolic steroids.” (published only in Danish)

Inspired by Sandro Donati’s work on the illegal drugs market, the Danish academic wanted to find out what drives the thousands of men all over the world who use anabolic steroids. Based on interviews with steroid users and an extensive literature review Alice Riis Bach has looked for answers to one question: Why do so many men develop the desire to change their bodies in order to live up to stereotypical media images where real men have broad shoulders, narrow waists and six-pack stomachs?

From abuse to dysmorphia

The pure pervasiveness of male media images is part of the explanation at a cultural and societal level. At the individual level many men have problems with food and their weight, shape and appearance.

Alice Riis Bach points out that research shows that many men suffer from low self-esteem for a variety of reasons. Some of them lost a parent at an early age, others experienced violence or sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence, and others again have been victims of bullying at school, at home or in sports clubs.

To compensate for violations and to cover up their emotional confusion and chaos some of these men perceive their bodies as objects which they want to fully control through dieting, weight lifting and the use of anabolic steroids and other performance enhancing drugs.

This can develop into muscle dysmorphia which is a form of eating disorder.

A person suffering from muscle dysmorphia is preoccupied with the idea that his body is too small or inadequately muscular. Therefore the individual spends hours lifting weights and gives excessive attention to his diet. His social life or work often suffers from the need to maintain the workout schedule, and often the person takes drugs despite knowing about the problems they may cause.

Too difficult to get help

Eating disorders are not the only reason for using anabolic steroids. Alice Riis Bach’s interviews with a number of men who have used anabolic steroids in fitness centres show that some men just experiment with the drugs and others get drawn in by training for competitions. Still, the aspect of eating disorders is very serious because it is largely unrecognised as a problem for men.

“There is a grey area between diagnosed eating disorders and men who complain about weight problems, go on diets, eat bucketfuls of protein, exercise compulsively and use anabolic steroids,” Alice Riis Bach points out.

Whilst many men may be suffering from psychological problems related to body perception, it is a problem that is largely unaddressed by therapists and health authorities. The issue is buried under gender barriers and prejudices such as the widespread belief that men do not develop eating disorders.

So at the moment men will find it very difficult to get help – provided that they want to look for it in the first place. Many men find it uncomfortable to discuss their feelings and relationship with their own body and they feel even more uncomfortable discussing it with a therapist.

“We need to find new ways to talk about this problem. All the talk about men’s vanity doping is condescending and does not meet men where they are in relation to the use of anabolic steroids. We also need to puncture the myth about how men should look and point out that the media image of men is just as manipulated as that of women,” says Alice Riis Bach.