

ATTACHMENT

For Item

#16

Tuesday,
July 16,
2024

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OF THE BOARD

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American Academy of Pediatrics

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July 16, 2024

TO: Chairwoman Nora Vargas
Supervisor Joel Anderson
Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer
Supervisor Monica Montgomery
Supervisor Jim Desmond

SUBJECT: Supporting Item 16: Affirmative Litigation Against Social Media Companies for Their Role in the Youth Mental Health Crisis

My name is Dr. Kanani Titchen and I am an Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine specialist at Rady Children's Hospital and assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine. I am writing to express my support for the County of San Diego's proposal to hold social media companies accountable for protecting the mental health of our youth.

I would like to share a recent example from my clinic. "Chris," came to see me in clinic for her painful periods when she was 13. She was a typical teen - exploring friend groups and sports and fashion and hobbies. She loved art and would create clay figures to give to her friends. When her friends and friends-of-friends started putting in special orders for clay figurines, she started her own social media channel. She would chat with her online fans as she created art. They would sometimes direct her to do certain things with the clay, and she would either comply or enter into some witty back and forth. Most of her fans were other kids. Her mom described to me how Chris would get monthly checks from the social media company, and this was a great boost to her self-esteem. She talked of going to art school after high school.

Chris increasingly struggled with anxiety and depression, and I repeatedly voiced my concern about her social media use. Her mom continued to assert that the social media channel boosted her self-confidence, especially when she got that check in the mail each month. Chris was seen in the Psych Emergency Department a few times over the next two years for self-cutting, an overdose attempt, restrictive eating disorder, and suicidal ideation. Her mom continued to support the social media channel. She didn't have as much time for friends and was less motivated to be around them, and social media was the only thing positive in her life, she said. But then Chris started to share with me and her mom that not all of the feedback on her social media channel was positive - that "fans" sometimes taunted her, called her fat, told her to kill herself. She, her mom, and I again discussed the use of social media.

Roughly 6 months later, when she was 16, after going through an intensive outpatient program to treat mood disorders, Chris returned to my clinic. But she was different - happy, settled. Of course I asked her, what changed? Was it the psych program? Simply growing up a bit? Without hesitation, Chris said, "I quit social media. I decided I like to see and be with my real friends. I'm happy now." The change was dramatic.

I wish I could say that Chris is singular - an unusual case of social media gone awry. But I see "Chris's" every day in clinic. I've had teens ask me what kind of cosmetic treatments and plastic surgery they can use to look more like their filtered social media photos and videos. Teens who genuinely want to "get healthy" are so easily led down the rabbit hole of algorithms that feed them pro-Anorexia (or "pro-ana") videos and food restriction plans. We know from data gathered by law enforcement during the COVID pandemic shutdown that social media became - and remains - a popular way to groom and recruit kids into commercial sexual exploitation.

I'm not a Luddite: I embrace technology. But for our kids whose brains are still growing, who are only just beginning to learn impulse control, and who are appropriately susceptible to peer influence and desiring acceptance, we need to shield them from companies who profit from their vulnerabilities.

We believe this proposal will play a vital role in addressing this crisis since to date there have been few meaningful changes by the industry and no adoption of federal or state policies curbing the industry's harm to developing minds. We believe our County should take an active role in holding social media companies accountable and to support the U.S. Surgeon General's call for warning labels on social media platforms.

Therefore, I urge your support for this proposal and to vote 'yes' on this item at the July 16th, 2024 Board of Supervisor's meeting.

Sincerely,

Kanani Titchen, M.D.

Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine Specialist at Rady Children's Hospital

Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine