

POSITION STATEMENT: **ADDRESSING WEIGHT STIGMA**

KEY MESSAGES

- Weight stigma can have long lasting psychological, social and behavioural impacts, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, binge eating, potential denial of jobs and biased attitudes from healthcare professionals.
- Weight discrimination does not motivate individuals to lose weight, but instead decreases their motivation levels and can create a barrier to accessing healthcare.
- National and local government should lead by example and ensure all policies, campaigns and communications avoid stigmatising language and imagery.

What is weight stigma?

Obesity can often be perceived as a self-inflicted condition solely under an individual's control [1]. Yet research over the last few decades has illustrated how complex the incidence of obesity can be, resulting from an interaction between various biological, social, economic and political factors [2].

According to the World Obesity Federation, "Weight stigma refers to the discriminatory acts and ideologies targeted towards individuals because of their weight and size" [3]. It is a social devaluation of people experiencing overweight and obesity, whereby their shape and size doesn't comply with enforced social norms. This type of discrimination can mean people with obesity are treated differently than others in many different settings including education, the media, workplaces and healthcare.

People with obesity can internalise these stigmatising messages, which can have long lasting psychological, social and behavioural impacts [1]. Psychological outcomes can include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor body image, self-harm and suicide. Behavioural outcomes can include unhealthy weight control practices, binge eating and avoidance of physical activity and health screening. Social outcomes can include social rejection by peers, potential denial of jobs and biased attitudes from healthcare professionals [4].

Weight stigma can be prevalent in healthcare settings, a space that should be safe and inclusive, which can result in people with obesity

not accessing services for fear of being judged [5]. Worryingly, physicians generally have lower levels of respect for patients with higher BMI [6].

What does the evidence say?

- The UK's All-party Parliamentary Group for Obesity reported that 88% of people living with obesity had experienced weight stigmatisation [5].
- Women are more likely to experience weight stigma compared to men [7].
- Almost half of UK adults living with obesity have felt judged because of their weight in clothes shops and health care settings [8].
- The World Obesity Federation reported that over 80% of UK adults believe people with obesity are viewed negatively [9].
- People with obesity often receive lower quality care from healthcare professionals [10].
- A study found 69% of doctors and 37% of dieticians reported biased attitudes towards people living with obesity [11].
- An analysis by the World Obesity Federation found nearly 10,000 tweets with stigmatising language on social media [3].
- Evidence suggests that stigmatising individuals with obesity does not motivate them to lose weight and instead decreases their motivation levels [4].

- More than half of UK adults reported that the news and popular media worsen the public perception of people with obesity [9,12].
- Tabloids and television often perpetuate weight stigma, which can hinder efforts to address obesity by preventing an effective system wide approach to creating healthier environments [4].

Policy context

Previous Government campaigns have been fixated solely on individual responsibility, focusing their message on getting people to 'eat less and move more'. This simplistic approach fails to address the wider social determinants of health, which leads to an increase of self-blame and internalisation of weight stigma [13]. Research suggests that public health campaigns focused on supporting people to engage in healthy behaviours without mention of obesity are the most motivating and least stigmatising [14].

There is no currently Government policy that directly seeks to address weight stigmatisation. However, the latest edition of the Government's strategies on obesity, 'Tackling Obesity' published in July 2020, included the opportunity for Primary Care Networks to equip their staff to become healthy weight coaches through training delivered by Public Health England – which is said to include addressing weight stigma.

In saying that, despite including bold measures

on advertising and promotion restrictions, within the strategy there was still an underlying message of individual blame through their 'Better Health' campaign and sensationalistic and stigmatising language to describe obesity, such as 'obesity time bomb' and 'morbidly obese'. [15]. Therefore, there is much more the Government could be doing to address weight stigma both internally, and to influence local government, healthcare professionals and media too.

Our position and what we will do

Policy change: In our refresh of the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight in July 2020, we updated the commitments to consider addressing weight stigma locally. The evidence base was updated to reflect this and highlight how detrimental this can be to supporting people living with obesity locally. We will continue to support local authorities in adopting the Declaration and their activities to meet this commitment.

Knowledge Share: We will continue to support local authorities within the Food Active network to address weight stigma internally, through resource development and learning events. We will continue to expand our resources on weight stigma, including our checklist 'Stamping out weight stigma: a checklist for the workforce', and host as a free to access resource on our website.

Communications: We will continually update and review our own internal communications to ensure it is not stigmatising or bias in any way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government should lead by example and ensure that all policies, campaigns and communications avoid weight stigma. This should further filter down to local government, too.
- The media should provide a stigma-free platform by using person-centred language and non-stigmatising images.
- Public health should focus efforts on addressing the structural drivers of obesity instead of solely individual responsibility.

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