

# Knowledge, attitudes, representations and declared practices of nurses and physicians about obesity in a university hospital: training is essential

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Individuals that are overweight or obese experience stigmatization and multiple forms of discrimination because of their weight in various settings, such as education, media, employment and also health care<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, healthcare providers (HCPs) have been documented to have weight bias<sup>1</sup>. Yet, weight bias has serious consequences at the psychological, medical and social levels<sup>2</sup>. Individuals with obesity who report being teased or victimized because of their weight have an increased risk of depression, low self-esteem, poor body image, stress and other psychiatric disorders<sup>3,4</sup>. Globally, weight bias reduces quality of life<sup>5</sup> and may also increase vulnerability to maladaptive eating behaviours, such as binge eating disorder, and physical activity avoidance, thus reinforcing a vicious circle for patients with obesity<sup>6-8</sup>.

Despite their crucial role in prevention and treatment of excess weight, some HCPs feel a lack of competence in taking care of patients with obesity and sometimes doubt of the long-term efficacy of their actions<sup>9,10</sup>. A first step would be that all HCPs are aware of current recommendations regarding regular physical activity, healthy eating, and treatment goals and approaches for adults and children with obesity, in order to avoid cacophony and ensure coherent messages. Knowledge of current guidelines and attitudes to prevent stigmatization are especially important. Therefore, this study aimed to assess knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, perception of opportunity for intervention, declared practices and the need for training and material of nurses and physicians about obesity in a Swiss University Hospital.

## 834 physicians and nurses participated in an online survey

We developed a questionnaire based on literature, exploratory interviews and expert committee review. It included 110 items and was divided into four parts

1. Professional and personal characteristics, including training related to obesity;
2. Knowledge of current recommendations regarding nutrition, physical activity, definitions and treatment goals;
3. Attitudes towards obesity and patients with obesity and
4. Reported practices.

After a pre-test with 15 physicians and nurses, the questionnaire

was sent online to all nurses and physicians (n = 3452) of various departments of the Swiss University Hospital. The questionnaire was anonymous and a local ethical commission approved the study protocol.

A total of 834 HCPs (72% female) participated in the survey (response rate: 24.2%).

## Most participants had no education related to obesity or did not remember it

During their study, almost 70% of the participants declared either having never received any education related to obesity or did not remember having received such training. Only 13% (n = 108) received a postgraduate training related to obesity.

Participants declared a low level of negative attitudes towards individuals living with obesity. However, the results highlighted a lack of knowledge to diagnose obesity in adults and children, as well as confidence and training to care for patients with obesity. One-third of providers did not know how to calculate body mass index (BMI).

Regarding nutrition guidelines, 60% of subjects knew how to compose a healthy balanced meal, 81% did know the recommended fruit and vegetable intake and 53% did know the recommended frequency of high-density food consumption. For physical activity, 72% and 31% of responders knew the current international guidelines for adults and children.

Half of providers felt it was part of their role to take care of patients with obesity, even if 55% of them had the feeling that they did not have adequate training. A vast majority (93.8%) of participants were convinced that an interdisciplinary team is needed for the treatment of obesity.

## Training should be improved

HCPs are in the front line to assess, diagnose and manage patients with obesity. Our study demonstrates that nurses and physicians working in a university hospital showed a low level of negative attitudes but a lack of knowledge and skills on obesity management. Therefore, training should be improved in this population to ensure adequate and coherent messages and equal access to evidence-based treatment for patients living with obesity.

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