Weight Stigma in Healthcare

A Barrier to Effective Patient Care

Rebecca Puhl, Ph.D.
UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health
Healthcare providers

Express stereotypes that patients with higher weight are:

- Lazy
- Unmotivated
- Lacking self-control
- Lacking willpower
- At fault for their weight
- Poor at self-management
- Less compliant

Doctors*
Nurses
Dietitians
Obstetricians
Mental health professionals
Physiotherapists
Occupational therapists
Exercise physiologists
Medical students

*Levels of weight bias in doctors are similar to the general population

(Sabin, Marini, & Nosek, PLoS One 2012)

Patients view healthcare providers as common sources of weight stigma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Sample (N)</th>
<th>Source of Weight Stigma</th>
<th>% of Patients Reporting Stigma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults engaged in commercial weight management (N=13,996) ¹</td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dietitians</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults engaged in commercial weight management (N=18,796) ²</td>
<td>Healthcare Providers</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women enrolled in a weight loss support organization (N=2,449) ³</td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults with type 2 diabetes (N=1,212) ⁴</td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with obesity (N=178) ⁵</td>
<td>Healthcare Providers</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postoperative bariatric surgery patients (N=300) ⁶</td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weight stigma hinders healthcare delivery

Compared to healthcare delivery with lower BMI patients, when interacting with higher weight patients, providers:

- Spend less time in appointments
- Demonstrate less rapport
- Engage in less patient-centered communication
- Engage in less discussion and intervention
- Report lower respect for patients as their BMI increases

Patient perspectives of clinical encounters

- Insensitive language about weight
- Banal weight loss advice
- Negative judgement due to their weight
- Negative assumptions: unhealthy lifestyle, not trying, all symptoms due to weight

Patient experiences with providers in clinical encounters

Patient experiences in primary care

Additional stigma-related themes affecting patient experiences in primary care:\n
- Disrespect from providers
- Poor communication and low trust
- Anticipated differential treatment
- Ambivalence in using health services
- Barriers: being weighed, medical equipment too small
- Switching doctors due to negative experiences
- Avoidance and/or delay of healthcare

With each increase in a patient’s BMI category, there is approximately a 2-fold increased likelihood of perceiving stigma in primary care\(^2\)

---
\(^1\) Alberga et al., *Primary Health Care Research & Development* 2019
\(^2\) Ferrante et al., *Obes Sci Pract* 2016
Patient avoidance of healthcare

N=498 White and Black women with BMI>25
- Disrespect from providers
- Unsolicited advice to lose weight
- Medical equipment too small for body
- Embarrassment at being weighed

Contribute to delay and avoidance of preventive healthcare

Amy et al., Int J Obesity 2006

N=2380 primary care patients with BMI>25
- Stigma experienced in healthcare
- Lower patient-centered communication
- Lower perceived respect from providers

Mediate associations between patient BMI, avoidance of healthcare, and changing doctors

Phelan et al., Obes Sci Pract 2021
If your doctor referred to your (or your child’s) weight in a way that makes you feel stigmatized, how would you react?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction to stigmatizing language</th>
<th>Adults (N=1,064)</th>
<th>Parents (N=445)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seek a new doctor who is more sensitive about weight</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid future appointments with my doctor</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Internalized weight bias (IWB) plays a role

N=313 women (mean BMI=28)

Higher IWB
↓
Body-related guilt
Body-related shame
↓
Healthcare stress
Healthcare avoidance

Mensinger et al., *Body Image* 2018

N=13,996 adults in commercial weight loss program (mean BMI=30)

Higher IWB
↓
Healthcare avoidance
Less frequent checkups
Lower quality of care

Puhl et al., *PLoS One* 2021

N=120 patients in a medical weight loss program (mean BMI=41)

Higher IWB
↓
Higher clinical attrition

Verhaak et al., *Int J Obesity* 2022

All studies accounted for demographics and relevant covariates
Addressing weight stigma in provider-patient interactions

Strategies to reduce weight stigma in healthcare must address communication:

- Self-awareness of bias
- Education about stigma
- Respectful language
- Supportive counseling
- Patient-centered approaches