

# Awareness of Obesity Bias: A Qualitative approach in Nurse Practitioner Education

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# Disclosure statement and Learner Objectives

- The authors of this presentation have nothing to disclose related to sponsorship or conflict of interest.
- Learner objectives:
  - Describe the problem of obesity in the United States.
  - Define obesity bias.
  - Recognize that obesity bias is prevalent among medical professionals.
  - Describe certain situations that are uncomfortable to a person with overweight or obesity.
  - Appreciate the importance of including obesity bias training in a NP course.
  - Become aware of your own obesity bias and consider formal training.
  - Educate others about obesity bias situations in your work setting.



# Background

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- Overweight and obesity account for some of the greatest health issues facing health care providers today (Ogden, Carroll, Fryar, & Flegal, 2015).
- Two out of three Americans have overweight and approximately 35% and 37% of adult men and women respectively have obesity ( Yang & Colditz, 2015).
- The increases in overweight and obesity (defined by a BMI > 25) is a condition that affects all ages, all racial and ethnic groups, and both genders.

# Background

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- Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between overweight/obesity and poor health, as well as increased risk for death (Centers for Disease Control, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).
- Common medical conditions associated with overweight and obesity are diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, and arthritis (Nuttall, 2015; Faienza et al., 2015).
- Because overweight and obesity are such prevalent illnesses affecting persons across the lifespan, the need for empathetic, evidence-based patient-centered care is warranted (Luig et al, 2019).



## Background

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- Unfortunately, obesity bias and obesity stigma are discriminatory beliefs or behaviors among healthcare providers and in many medical settings that may impact patients' willingness to seek treatment (Fastenau, et al., 2019; Kahan & Manson, 2019).
- Medical providers reported altering their medical practices and choice of treatments when interacting with patients who have overweight and/or obesity compared to patients with a normal BMI (Ward-Smith & Peterson, 2016; Ferrante, Piasecki, Ohman-Strickland, & Crabtree, 2009)
- Mismanagement of persons with overweight and obesity may stem from a lack of graduate coursework and formal training (Jay et al., 2009)



# Background

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Nurse practitioner (NP) students, in particular, are often unaware of their obesity bias (Phelan et al., 2015).



# Purpose

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The purpose of this study was to collect NP students' attitudes and perceptions toward overweight and obesity from their clinical practice in order to inform future obesity-specific training programs for NP students.

Nursing researchers requested that NP students become more aware of provider weight bias and discrimination and reflect on how those beliefs and attitudes may cause patients with overweight and obesity to avoid preventative health care and screenings.

# Methods

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- This qualitative study took place in an online classroom forum with 45 students enrolled in a Women's Health Nurse Practitioner (NP) course.
- NP students were asked to provide feedback on their encounters with overweight or obesity bias in their clinic environment and the strategies they would recommend implementing in the practice setting to decrease obesity stigma and bias.
- Two of the authors of this study compiled the responses to identify common themes.



# Demographic Results

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- A total of 45 female NP students ( $M = 34$  years old;  $SD = 7.9$ ) attending a mid-size university on the Gulf Coast participated in the study. Learning environment was all online.
- The race of participants was 53% White/Caucasian American, 40% Black/African American, 4% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% Asian American.
- Self-reported BMI ranged from 18 to 43 ( $M = 27.5$ ;  $SD = 5.9$ ).

# Thematic Results

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1. Many medical office spaces and equipment do not accommodate patients with overweight and obesity.
2. Preceptors' reactions and frustrations inside and outside the examination room were clearly noticed when patients have overweight or obesity.
3. Students felt that training on weight-related issues and sensitivity should be available for all medical providers and medical staff.
4. Students expressed a desire for medical professionals to change the societal perception of overweight and obesity.
5. Students had an emphasis on systemic and community-based action plans to increase motivation to live healthier.

# Theme 1 - Many medical office spaces and equipment do not accommodate patients with overweight and obesity

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- “In the clinical setting [we do] not carry bigger gowns for patients, and nurses are often searching for larger blood pressure cuffs because they are not kept in every room.”
- “The scale is located in a wall nook that is thirty-two inches wide. Even for a patient that is in the upper level of normal body mass index, this width is rather narrow.”
- “The central location and expectation to step on the scale in front of everyone could be enough to make those wavering on their decision to come to the clinic ...”



## Theme 2 - Preceptors' reactions and frustrations inside and outside the examination room were clearly noticed regarding patients that have overweight and obesity

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- “Physicians in the OB/GYN clinic frequently feel more frustrated with patients who had obesity as compared to thinner patients. They felt this was due to the feeling that they are non-compliant with their treatment plans, and they perceive the GYN examination as being more difficult to perform.”
- “One of the medical assistants was preparing to bring a patient into an examination room. The assistant asked another staff member if there were any extra-large speculums because the patient was ‘huge.’”
- “The provider feels that the patients are not making an effort, are lazy, and are wasting the physician’s time.”

## Theme 3 -Students felt that training on weight-related issues and sensitivity should be available for all medical providers and medical staff

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- “Teaching staff about appropriate phrases to use when discussing a patient’s weight and being sensitive to a patient’s emotional well-being when discussing treatment options would be of utmost importance to establish in quality care.”
- “Educating peers on the importance of assisting patients in setting a goal to obtain and maintain a healthy lifestyle is important.”
- “Non-clinical staff should be taught that obesity is a complex condition, and many patients have attempted to lose weight numerous times but may have failed due to non-controllable factors such as genetics and/or chronic health conditions.”

## Theme 4 - Students expressed a desire for medical professionals to change the societal perception of overweight and obesity.

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- “In the clinical setting, it is important to emphasize healthy lifestyles instead of focusing on achieving the ideal weight. This will encourage the patient to attain goals that lead them to successful weight loss without the pressure of obesity stigma.”
- “Blaming individuals for being responsible for their weight is an assumption ... In order to provide fair and proper treatment for obese patients, it is essential for all healthcare providers to evaluate their thoughts related to obesity.”
- “It may be a long time before society changes its framing of obesity, but health care professionals and clinics are positioned to lead the way toward greater acceptance and better patient care.”

## Theme 5 - An emphasis on systemic and community-based action plans to increase motivation to live healthier

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- “An obesity action plan must be culturally sensitive.”
- The Obesity Action Coalition “promotes guidelines to decrease provider obesity bias, as well as guidelines for media portrayals of individuals affected by obesity, which shapes public understanding and attitudes.”

# Conclusions

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- Often times, students and preceptors alike are unaware of their biases or their engagement in weight bias.
- From this study we see that NP students are more aware of weight bias in their clinical practice settings; Receiving specific educational modules related to how to work with patients presenting with overweight and obesity is critical to reducing weight bias.
- It is important that both students and those teaching them are aware of how the language they use and the built environment of the clinical setting might impact patient care.



# Questions??

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- References available upon request.
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- Thank you for your attention