Unexpected patient experiences at a rural academic weight loss center: Obesity stigma considerations and concerns

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Background:
- The prevalence of adult obesity in the US is 39.8%.
- Obesity Stigma is thought to negatively impact the health of individuals with obesity, generate disparities, and interfere with effective obesity intervention.
- A perceived weight bias can increase depression, anxiety, and stress, which can contribute to worsening of this chronic disease.
- There have been efforts to address obesity stigma in healthcare.
- Patients still experience shame, embarrassment, and feeling anomalous.

Objective:
To assess the patient experience and garner any perceived obesity stigma from a targeted sample of patients with obesity receiving care at a dedicated weight loss center

Design and Methods:
- Patients (N=23) were recruited from Dartmouth-Hitchcock’s Weight & Wellness Center (WWC), a rural academic obesity clinic.
- A convergent parallel mixed-methods study was conducted to evaluate patient experience and outcomes to assess quality of perceived care.
- Interviews and questionnaires were completed.
- Data was transcribed, and analyzed for thematic similarities and differences in patient experiences, and perceptions. Quantitative data was reported using descriptive statistics.

Results:
- 87% of the patients interviewed perceived no stigma and felt the WWC was successful in addressing obesity stigma.
- 13% of the participants interviewed felt the clinic made stigma worse by drawing attention to their large size with special chairs, that did not “make them feel normal.”
- Participants interviewed felt the clinic should hire staff with a BMI over 30kg/m² in order to better understand the “struggle of patients with obesity.”
- Patients interviewed expressed the sentiment that obesity stigma should be addressed in a class as part of the program.

Conclusion:
- One cannot assume that because of a modified environment within a formal obesity clinic that bias has been adequately addressed.
- Despite efforts to address obesity stigma individuals continue to struggle with bias, and weight loss.
- Perceptions are personal, and weight bias should be addressed individually to improve patient experience.

Limitations:
Small sample size limits the generalizability of the results. It still shows that based on patient perception, obesity stigma exists even within a dedicated obesity clinic.