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Guest Editorial

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Note: *The World Obesity Federation is a registered charity.*

The epidemic of obesity is now recognised as one of the most important public health problems facing the world today. The causes of obesity are complex and differ from individual to individual. There are a multitude of 'obesogenic' factors contributing to the increased energy consumption and decreased energy expenditure that are responsible for obesity, including: declining levels of physical labour; higher levels of food consumption or a decrease in energy density; social, economic, educational and cultural factors. At the World Obesity Federation our mission is to lead and drive global efforts to prevent, reduce and treat obesity.

We often assume that education on obesity needs to be directed towards patients. But research is increasingly finding that educating health professionals may be even more important. In an October 2013 article in the New England Journal of Medicine, researchers James Colbert and Sughrut Jangi found that while obesity is becoming increasingly prominent "physicians-in-training frequently fail to recognise obesity, are unfamiliar with treatment options, and spend relatively little clinic time treating obesity" (Colbert and Jangi 2013).

Too often obesity treatment is reduced to advising an obese patient to “eat less and move more”. If diet and exercise suit a particular patient then strategies need to be put into place to motivate that patient. What if they have a physical disability that prevents them from exercising? What if they work and live in a sedentary environment or “food desert” that doesn’t facilitate exercise or a nutritious diet? Is counselling needed to overcome mental health causes of their excess weight? Better education is needed to help patients overcome the barriers to weight loss. In some severe cases, lifestyle interventions are not the solution. When do you refer a patient for bariatric surgery? Is pharmacotherapy an option? How do we address childhood obesity or obesity in pregnancy? Again, better education is needed to address the complex multi-faceted nature of this chronic illness. With only 10-15 minutes to discuss their patients’ excess weight, health professionals need evidence-based strategies to help them address not just the symptoms but the root cause of their patients’ obesity. This requires a multidisciplinary approach so health professionals can tailor their treatment to address the unique causes and severity of their patients’ obesity.

More often than not patients leave a consultation ill equipped to manage their obesity. Even worse, many come away misunderstood and even discriminated against by their clinician. A 2002 survey of 2,449 overweight and obese women in the United States of America found that 69% reported bias from their doctor, 46% from nurses and 37% from dietitians (Puhl and Brownell 2006). With sobering statistics like these it is no wonder that patients turn to a multi-billion dollar weight loss industry for solutions, falling into the trap of ‘yo-yo dieting’.

Effective obesity management begins with well-trained health professionals. That is why the World Obesity Federation developed SCOPE - an online obesity education programme that equips health professionals with a solid evidence-based education in all aspects of obesity management. The aim of SCOPE is to bring together health professionals from a variety of disciplines, and train them on how to manage the growing global obesity epidemic. After completion of the programme they receive an internationally recognised certificate that confirms that they have improved their training in obesity management through the guidance of leading obesity experts.

Since releasing SCOPE online 2 years ago, World Obesity have registered over 8,000 health professionals from around the world, certified 50 health professionals and recognised over 150 SCOPE Fellows. Our programme has been endorsed by over 50 national and regional obesity associations and institutions such as the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. Soon we will bring our resources to social media to provide a forum for health professionals to share best practices in obesity management.

Obesity is now reaching pandemic proportions across much of the world, and its consequences are set to impose unprecedented health, financial and social burdens on global society, unless effective actions are taken to reverse the trend. Here at World Obesity, we feel that health professionals are key to the reversal of the trend along with further research into obesity, policy of governments and businesses at global, regional and national levels, practical training, publications, conferences and accreditation.

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