

Health Professionals' Perceptions of Insurance Coverage for Weight Loss Services

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Background: Current guidelines suggest obese patients attend intensive, multi-disciplinary weight loss programs. Such interventions are often delivered by non-physician health professionals (HPs). Past studies show physicians report lack of insurance coverage as a barrier to care. Our first objective was to determine whether HPs perceptions of insurance coverage-related challenges and solutions. Our secondary objective was to examine whether these perceptions varied by patient panel income level.

Methods: In 2014, we conducted a cross-sectional, web-based survey of HPs in nutrition, nursing, behavioral/mental health, exercise, and pharmacy. Our outcomes were HPs' identification of insurance coverage as a top three (1) "challenge" or (2) "solution" for obesity management and weight loss. Our independent variable was "patient panel income," dichotomized as "mostly low-income" versus "evenly distributed/mostly not low-income." We performed logistic regression with survey weights to calculate predicted probabilities, adjusted for HP profession, age, gender, and race.

Results: Among 450 weight management HPs, mean age was 44.9 years; 86% were women; 44% had low-income panels. Overall, 23% of HPs endorsed current insurance coverage as a challenge and 57% viewed improved coverage as a solution. Relative to HPs with non low-income panels, HPs with low-income panels had similar predicted probabilities of identifying insurance coverage as a challenge to care (28% vs 20%, $p=0.33$) and viewing future benefits expansions as a solution to improve outcomes (47% vs 64%, $p=0.08$).

Conclusions: Regardless of panel income level, most HPs perceive insurance coverage of their services as an important factor in facilitating weight loss. While the Affordable Care Act potentially expands coverage of obesity care to low-income patients, there is no legislation regarding benefits for non-governmental insurers; yet health professionals perceive that all patients may benefit from expanded coverage.