Does the public health narrative of obesity influence the media’s obesity coverage?

Ximena Ramos Salas, PhD
Managing Director, Canadian Obesity Network

May 24, 2018
European Congress on Obesity
Media Masterclass
Weight bias and discrimination is rampant in our schools, workplaces, health systems and media. 

The problem is widespread.

- Elementary school kids with obesity face a 63% higher chance of being bullied
- 54% of adults with obesity report being stigmatized by coworkers
- 64% of adults with obesity report experiencing weight bias from a health care professional
- 72% of images and 77% of videos stigmatized persons with obesity according to recent media studies
Weight Bias
refers to negative attitudes toward others because of their weight

Weight Stigma
refers to stereotypes and labels we assign to people who have obesity

Weight Discrimination
refers to actions against people who have obesity that can cause social exclusion and inequities
Public Health Obesity Narratives

- Public health messages are overly simplistic and do not represent their realities
- Public health messages put the blame on individuals with obesity
- Quantification of health in terms of BMI and weight is unrealistic

Weight Bias

• A significant challenge to implementing comprehensive obesity related chronic disease prevention and management is a prevailing view that shaming individuals experiencing obesity will motivate a change in behavior. In fact the opposite is true.

• Individuals with obesity perceive current individual-focused obesity prevention and management initiatives as overly simplistic, disempowering and stigmatizing.
Weight Bias Experiences of Persons with Obesity

Lack of understanding of obesity

Impact on Self

Behavioural Response

Experiences of weight bias and stigma

Emotional Response

Resistance & Recovery

Changing the Narrative in the Media

• Weight bias and weight-based discrimination is associated with economic and human costs to individuals living with obesity – key determinant of health.

• We must change the narrative that obesity can be prevented primarily by eating healthy and exercising

• Avoid the temptation to simplify obesity as an individual behaviour issue; consider the complexity of obesity
Key Messages

• Obesity is a complex disease that is the result of the interactions of genetic, metabolic, behavioral and environmental factors.
• There is no single cause and there is no single solution.
• There are effective behavioral treatments, surgical options as well as medications to which individuals living with obesity need improved access.
THANK YOU

www.obesitynetwork.ca/join

@CanObesityNet

Facebook.com/CONRCO