Obesity: Changing the Narrative in the Media

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April 10, 2019
Disclosures

• Professional fees
  – Novo Nordisk
  – Nutrisystem

• Personal biases that favor:
  – Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  – Respect for people living with obesity
  – Critical thinking about all evidence
Presentation Objectives

• Describe the gap between the reality of obesity and media narratives

• Identify ways to change the narrative

Source: Pawel Loj / flickr
Misrepresentation of Obesity and the People Affected

- Degrading images
- Stereotypical portrayals
- False information regarding
  - The disease
  - Treatment and prevention

Having a Whale of a Time, photograph © Mr TGT / flickr
Degrading Images Are the Norm

- Butts and guts
- Dehumanized individuals
- Sad children
False Information About Obesity

- Sensationalism
- Catastrophizing narratives
- Myths about causes

You can't blame the military for your fat ass, according to a new VA ruling.

Task & Purpose - Apr 8, 2019
For example, you may be rated 40% because of Agent Orange related diabetes but the diabetes may cause obesity so you may be able to get ...

Skip Breakfast, Get Fat
Brain Craves High-Calorie Foods When You Skip Breakfast, Study Shows
By Kelli Miller
Misinformation About Obesity Treatment

- Sensational and atypical diet and exercise stories
- Depiction of evidence-based treatment as “the easy way out”

'Blue Bloods': Why Fans Are Angry with the Show's Portrayal of Gastric Bypass

Nicole Weaver | MORE ARTICLES
April 8, 2019
Result:
Unrealistic Expectations for Obesity Self-Help

**Obesity Treatments - U.K.**
1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?
766 respondents

- Self-directed diet and exercise: 59.5%
- Intensive lifestyle programs: 22.0%
- Bariatric surgery: 10.2%
- Obesity medications: 8.4%

**Obesity Treatments - U.S.**
1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?
776 respondents

- Self-directed diet and exercise: 52.5%
- Intensive lifestyle programs: 26.1%
- Bariatric surgery: 15.9%
- Obesity medications: 5.5%

Source: Google Surveys research by ConscienHealth and OAC
Misinformation About Prevention

WE KNOW WHAT WORKS

Changing Behaviors
- Nutrition
- Physical Activity
- Breastfeeding

Implementation → CDC Funded Programs

Reaching Across Settings
- Early Care & Education (ECE)
- Schools
- Healthcare
- Community
The Result:
A Relentless Rise in Obesity Prevalence
Cancer and Obesity: The Challenge of Prevention and Treatment

How Can We Change the Media Narrative?
Three Things Are Critical

• Provide facts to counter myths
• Put a human face on obesity
• Vigorous, persistent advocacy

Source: OAC Image Gallery
Counter the Bias that Obesity Is Simply the Result of Poor Choices

Environment • Choices • Genes

70%
Long Viewed as a Matter of Choice

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?” (Feb 2013)

- Bad personal choices was the dominant explanation in 2013
- Data from ongoing tracking
- Respondents asked to pick one

Source: ConscienHealth research 2013.02
The Truth Is That

Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease

Heritability 70%

• Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
• But environmental factors serve to activate it
• Then, people can choose what to do about it

Source: Musani, Erickson, and Allison, 2008, AJCN
Help People Understand the Complexity of Obesity

Obesity Science
Is Bringing Better Insights and Solutions

• Hypothalamus controls fat mass and blood sugar
• More therapies to manage obesity
• Bariatric surgery extends life and puts diabetes in remission

Neurons, photograph © ZEISS Microscopy / flickr
Put a Human Face on Obesity

Bias compromises the quality of care

- Less empathetic care
- Less preventive care
- Patients feel berated and disrespected
- Obesity blamed for every symptom

“You could walk in with an ax sticking out of your head and they would tell you your head hurt because you are fat.”
Vigorous, Persistent Advocacy
It’s Changing Hearts

- Fewer people think of obesity as a problem of bad personal choices
- People are shifting toward more diverse views of obesity

Source: ConscienHealth/OAC weight bias tracking research, 2017.05
And It’s Changing Minds

Retracted -- All Is Lost and I Have No Hope: The Obesity Epidemic

George D. Lundberg, MD
DISCLOSURES | February 15, 2019

Editor's Note (February 22, 2019): Medscape values a diverse range of opinions on issues relevant to the medical community. While we welcome thought-provoking and even controversial points of view in our commentaries and in comments from our readers, we do not endorse weight bias, nor bias towards any group.
Key Resources

- Media guidelines
- Non-stigmatizing image galleries
What’s Required for Change?

Progress will require:

• **Objectivity** to replace bias

• **Curiosity** about obesity and the people it affects

• **Care** for these people

Targets of Opportunity, photograph by Randy Robertson / flickr
More Information

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