

**ETHICAL DILEMMAS PLUS PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS IN  
OBESITY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

With the advent of globalization, technology, mankind has encountered a problem called Obesity. At the beginning, it was unnoticed as man was in pursuit of bigger dreams and higher pursuits but obesity soon became an Epidemic and as we speak of today, it has become a Pandemic with close to 3 million people dying each year as a result of being overweight/ obese<sup>[1]</sup> and if not managed, it will have a serious repercussion at the individual health and on the economy of the country. Statistics are alarming and forecast about obesity indicates that obesity has become a disease.

However, despite the influx of obese people in our society, we cannot trivialise the disease. We need to sensitize people about it, bring about measures to combat obesity and most importantly, not let down those who are suffering about it. There should be no discrimination towards obese People and authorities and public together should understand that obese people if given proper guidelines and appropriate support, will contribute more to society.

As society has always portrayed the survival of the fittest, we are actually living in a similar kind of society where we see obese people being mocked at and are not given equal opportunities. Moreover, health care professionals have a major role to play in the management of obesity.

**Obesity** is a medical condition in which excess body fat has accumulated to the extent that it may have a negative effect on health, leading to lowered life expectancy and/ or raised health problems<sup>[2]</sup>

The criterion for being called obese varies from country to country. In western countries, a cut off level of 30 and above is called Obese (Class I), 35 and more is called Obese (Class II), 40 and more being Extreme Obesity (Class III)<sup>[1]</sup>

In the eastern countries, overweight is defined as a BMI of 23 or higher, and obesity as a BMI of 27 or higher.

### **The problem statement of Obesity global is as follows**

The US topped the list with 13 per cent of the obese people worldwide in 2013, while Indochinese put together accounted for 15 per cent of the world's obese population, with 46 and 30 million obese people respectively. According to the study, number of obese and overweight people globally increased from 857 million in 1980 to 2.1 billion in 2013. This forms one-third of the world's population.<sup>[3]</sup> Obesity maybe the only morbid condition which has kept on rising compared to other public health problems.

The situation in India is not to be taken lightly. India has not been spared and is now third among countries, just behind US and China. Already, India is the capital of diabetes and it appears to be giving competition to US and China despite its blooming economy.

Among the states most afflicted by Obesity, we notice Punjab is the leading state with both male and female rank followed by Kerala and Goa.<sup>[4]</sup>

Coming to public health concern, we can compare the obesogenic environment to air polluted Environment. While breathing is involuntary and particles settle in the airways resulting in lung disease, our eating habits are voluntary as we choose what we eat. Hence, obesity can be prevented.

The main health concerns associated with Obesity include musculo-skeletal system (osteoarthritis), circulatory system (risk of coronary heart disease), Metabolic and endocrine systems (diabetes type 2), respiratory system (sleep apnoea), gall stones, nervous system (depression) and even the reproductive system are affected with polycystic ovarian syndrome and erectile dysfunction being more commonly associated with Obesity. We used to call

syphilis as the disease which affects almost all the system of the body; Obesity is no exception.

Furthermore, The Economic Impact of Obesity is a concern to one and all.

- Obesity cost the Indian economy \$200 billion from 2005-2015. The World Bank estimated that the annual cost of malnutrition to the world economy is approximately \$80 billion, of which the direct cost to the Indian economy is around \$10 billion.<sup>[5]</sup> Having said that, obesity brings disadvantages in Employment. It causes increased business costs. Obesity-related job absenteeism costs \$4.3 billion annually.<sup>[8]</sup> Obesity is associated with lower productivity while at work, which costs \$506 per obese worker annually.<sup>[6]</sup> As the BMI shoots up, so does the number of sick leaves, medical claims and also the health care costs. It has been proved that obese people have higher rates of absenteeism, more disability leave and the end product is a decreased productivity from company and increased costs for employers.

To add salt to injury, Obesity-related medical treatment costs between \$147 and \$210 billion a year, or nearly 10 percent of all annual medical spending.<sup>[6]</sup>

With the advent of globalization, many fast food franchises have spread across the globe and in the wake of woman emancipation as we have now working mothers, the grandmothers traditional recipe has lost value as a busy life drive most of people to have easy access to fast food but mind you that such shortcut will have impairment on health as years pass by. The chickens which you may be eating at your local fast food are given hormones and antibiotics to accelerate growth, the oil has adverse reaction on the circulatory system and it has recently been found that products used for crisps and fries can be carcinogenic.<sup>[7]</sup>

Children are brought up in an obesogenic environment where the canteen serves oily food and soda, their taste are already adjusted to it. So should we go for healthy approach and ban soda and risk uproar of students? However, some institutions including Manipal University have banned the selling of fizzy drinks on the campus.

In the same line of thought, people who are obese want to go for fast weight loss but it is not a realistic approach as losing weight implies losing more water or even lean tissue, dehydration can be the outcome.

Experts say that the present 150 minute weekly target exercise guidelines are unrealistic.<sup>[8]</sup>

In addition to public health concerns, The Bariatric surgery which is one of the line of management and treatment of morbid obesity and obesity has its pros and cons. Its cons are allergic reactions, dumping syndrome, infections, bleeding, vitamin deficiencies, ulcers and death.

Coming to the ethical dilemmas of Obesity, Firstly, ethical dilemmas stem from the unacceptable social stigma people are scared of. It is basically a myth in which people care for what others say and they end up looking for easy faster ways to lose weight. As a result of which bariatric surgeries crop up and threaten longevity of lives. The consequences of weight stigma lead to obese individual being more depressed, anxious, poorer psychological adjustment and at times, acceptance leading to low self esteem.

Obese people are less likely to be hired or promoted. Special concerns arise in Industries such airlines where fitness is a must. Airlines have been facing pressures to increase size widths and in 2000, the extra weight of obese passengers cost airlines a whopping US\$275 million<sup>[1]</sup> Even, some airlines have refused rights of obese individuals to travel.

The weight stigma appears to be everywhere and even in Medical field, it is very much present. The alarming consequence is that the patient will avoid obtaining medical care because of these negative experience, may end up with more serious health problem at late stage which cannot be treated then. Telling someone with obesity to simply eat less is about as effective as asking someone with depression to simply cheer up.

We have classified Obesity according to Body Mass Index which is nothing than the weight in kg divided by height in  $\text{cm}^2$  but the same BMI which was made for the common man so that it can have an idea about his health is not the ideal one. BMI focuses on weight but does not measure the amount of fat. In athletes, the BMI can be on the higher side and hence is not a good index. Instead, it has been found out that

Waist to hip ratio, which examines fat distribution is a better index.

Role of Media is also important. Media portrays the size 0 in advertisements and creates a negative impact on obese people.

Plato said “Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder”

Can fat be beautiful? Indeed, it all depends how we take it.

One way of breaking taboos and challenging perceptions is what Sydney festival is showing us using a dance production. On 21<sup>st</sup> January, the Sydney film festival premieres 'Nothing to Lose', which is said to be breaking boundaries by putting on stage seven plus-sized dancers. The show hopes to influence not only the way that we think – but how we see them.<sup>[10]</sup>

Also, The International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) which was founded in 1997. It is globally oriented and describes its mission as promoting size acceptance and helping to end weight-based discrimination.<sup>[11]</sup>

Last but not least, weight stigma can be reduced. Among various strategies, some particular strategies which health care professionals can use while managing an obese patient.

1. Consider that patients may have had negative experiences with other health professionals regarding their weight, and be sensitive when you approach patients.
2. Recognize the complex cause of obesity and communicate this colleagues and patients to avoid stereotypes that obesity is attributable to personal willpower.
3. Explore all causes of presenting problems including weight
4. Recognize that many patients have tried to lose weight repeatedly
5. Emphasize behaviour changes rather than just the number on the scale

It is also useful to identify ones bias. In such a situation asking the following can be helpful.

1. Do I make assumptions based only on weight regarding a person's character, professional success, intelligence, health status or lifestyle behaviours?
2. Am I comfortable working with people of all shapes and sizes?
3. Do I give appropriate feedback to encourage healthful behaviour change?

And for people who think they are obese, some tips include wearing clothes that fit them and with which they are comfortable in, surround with positive people, participate in activities they love, and stop comparing themselves with others.

In the lime light of this paper, Obesity has become a public health concern which if not dealt now will infiltrate the current and next generation and can lead to serious health problems and economy problems. However, the dilemmas associated with it are not to be ignored. There should be no discrimination towards obese people.

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