



The importance of overcoming stigma

Important points needing urgent attention

FACT SHEET

People who are overweight or living with obesity are often targets of bias and hurtful stigmatisation. This badly affects their daily lives, threatening their health, generating health inequalities, and interfering with effective obesity intervention.

Stigma can lead to avoidance of treatment, increase of eating disorders and decrease of physical activity, depression and even risk of suicide.

There are five important points that need urgent attention:

1. Respect towards patients living with obesity,

Patients living with obesity often complain that they are not treated respectfully. People living with obesity should be protected from abuse on all levels. This is true for adults, but also for children and adolescents.

There is an urgent need for greater respect from politicians, healthcare workers, scientists, media, schools and from everyone generally who are inclined to stigmatise people living with obesity.

2. Acceptance that obesity is not a lifestyle choice.

Obesity is frequently regarded as a lifestyle choice, even amongst patients themselves, their families and friends. This discourages many patients from seeking medical advice.

It originates from poor knowledge about obesity as a chronic disease. There are many factors that can cause obesity which are beyond someone's control. These include genetic and endocrine conditions, environmental factors such as stress, living in an obesogenic environment and the increasingly sedentary lifestyle patterns that many people now lead.

3. Recognition of obesity as a chronic disease.

Obesity needs to be recognised as a chronic disease across all member states of the European Union. Currently only one country, Portugal, recognises obesity as such. This is despite the fact that it is recognised as a disease by the World Health Organization (WHO). Left untreated, obesity causes numerous other diseases including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer and depression.

4. Impartial and transparent discussion.

Financial concerns are becoming a more important issue than the well-being of patients. This is due to influential stakeholders including industry, media and governments avoiding the discussion of obesity and the stigma attached to it.

Healthcare costs need to be regarded as an investment and not as a burden. After all, it is less expensive to address health problems before they lead to other chronic diseases.

5. Reducing stigmatization and discrimination can improve recovery rates.

It is important to create a supportive healthcare environment to ensure the successful treatment of people with obesity. With the right support, people living with obesity can make real progress.