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Citation:

Flint, SW and Nobles, J and Gately, P and Sahota, P (2018) Weight stigma and discrimination: a call to media. *The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology*, 6 (3). pp. 169-170. ISSN 2213-8587 DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(18\)30041-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(18)30041-X)

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Weight stigma and discrimination; a call to media

Flint SW,¹ Nobles J, ^{1,2} Gately P, ^{1,2} Sahota, P,¹ on behalf of Association for the Study of Obesity, Obesity Empowerment Network, Helping People Overcome Obesity Problems, World Obesity Federation, and the Applied Obesity Research Centre and Weight Stigma Research Group at Leeds Beckett University

¹School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QS

²MoreLife, Leeds, UK

Word count: 500

Conflicts of interests: None of the authors declare any conflicts of interest.

During 2017, a substantial number of media articles have been published in the UK, which stigmatise and discriminate people with overweight and obesity. Such articles are read by millions of people daily – in online and offline modalities. Given that weight stigma attitudes predict discriminatory behaviours,¹ the role of the media is deeply concerning. For the direct and indirect targets of weight stigma, this can have profound impacts on their physical and mental health.²⁻³

The media portrayal of obesity – stigmatising and inaccurate⁴⁻⁵ – is influential and insidious to popular belief. Yet publishers and editors rarely challenge this media content, and so a stream of derogatory articles flood into mainstream media. Challenging stigmatising and discriminatory media content is needed, and it is in response to recent examples that we write this letter to the editor.

The first example published by The Times – “Heffalump Traps will Clear the NHS of Fatties”⁶ – deemed obesity to be caused solely by controllable lifestyle behaviours which is erroneous to empirical evidence. In the second, a Daily Mail article entitled “Why I refuse to let my daughter be taught by a fat teacher”,⁷ interviewed a mother about her decision to stop her child attending a nursery because she perceived staff to be overweight. Third, in the Herald Sun, “Obese? You’re probably too lazy to exercise”,⁸ stated laziness to be the main cause of obesity. Finally – and most notably – in Esquire, an abhorrent article included the deplorable remark “I’d kill them all and render them down into candles”,⁹ ‘them’ referring to people with overweight and obesity. These articles reinforce that weight stigmatisation and discrimination is acceptable, and thus endorse and encourage such societal public beliefs.

It is therefore vitally important that media portrayal of obesity becomes non-stigmatising. Thus, we call on the media to:

1. adhere to the Society for Professional Journalists code of ethics¹⁰ which states that journalists should “Avoid stereotyping: Journalists should examine the ways that their values may shape their reporting” (p.1);
2. accurately portray obesity;
3. refrain from publishing articles which stigmatise and discriminate people with obesity;
4. use non-stigmatising images when reporting on obesity; and,
5. take the opportunity – where stigma and discrimination are reported – to condemn such behaviour, as they have for other topics (e.g. mental health).

Media sources do not adhere to the ethical standards of the Society of Professional Journalists¹⁰ when reporting on obesity. Instead, perhaps counterintuitively, they promote weight stigma and discrimination. Collaborative and pro-active work is required to reduce the weight stigma and discrimination evidenced across society.

Lastly, we call on everybody to speak out against discrimination of all kinds, including weight status. Fortunately, recent history tells us that stigma and discrimination can be overcome through greater understanding, policy and legislation. It is no longer acceptable, for example, to stigmatise people based on sex, ethnicity, and mental health; the media playing a fundamental role in (re-)shaping popular beliefs. This commitment is now needed to shift the narrative around overweight and obesity.

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