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Why the weight? A qualitative analysis of interactions between patients with morbid obesity and the Irish healthcare system

Sixty percent of Ireland's adult population is overweight or obese. Evidence to date has shown that the causes of obesity are multifaceted, requiring a range of different solutions at various levels. This qualitative study aimed to explore the opinions of 15 patients with morbid obesity regarding the effectiveness of specific individual and population-based nutritional and lifestyle interventions aimed at tackling obesity. A representative sample of 15 patients with morbid obesity (BMI >40 kg/m²) was selected from three general practices in the greater Dublin area. Participants took part in a semi-structured face-to-face individual clinical interview. Questions focused on participants' experiences of discussing their weight with their general practitioner (GP) and other healthcare providers, and their perceptions of the usefulness of various public health interventions aimed at reducing national obesity levels. Thematic framework analysis was undertaken, to identify the dominant and subdominant themes. Results indicate that many patients with morbid obesity have either never discussed their weight with their GP or have had negative experiences. Stigma and embarrassment were identified as common issues which prevent patients discussing their weight with their GP. Poor motivation, medical comorbidities and denial that excess weight is a problem were also identified as barriers. Opinions regarding the effectiveness of specific public health measures were mixed. Strengths of this study include its topical subject matter, and the fact that there has been limited qualitative research into obesity in Ireland to date. Limitations include its small sample size, an excess of female participants and unavoidable selection bias, as only patients comfortable with their weight and willing to articulate their views on this sensitive and emotive topic in a formal interview setting were included.

Biography

Katie Maher is a final-year Registrar in General practice (family medicine), training under the auspices of the Trinity College Dublin/HSE Specialist Training Program in General practice. Upon graduation, she hopes to gain employment as an Assistant General Practitioner and to increase her involvement in academic general practice.

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