

Words matter: a qualitative investigation of which weight status terms are acceptable and motivate weight loss when used by health professionals

Health professionals play a vital role in the management and treatment of obesity, however are aware of the issues surrounding weight bias and stigma, and so may be reluctant to broach the subject of weight status, even with patients living with overweight and obesity. Challenges in broaching this subject with patients include a lack of training in the skills required for non-stigmatising weight management discussions and a lack of understanding of the impact of using different terms to inform people of their personal weight status.

This qualitative study aims to investigate the views and opinions of individuals living with overweight and obesity surrounding the acceptability of terms to describe weight status and how this affects their motivation to lose weight when used by health professionals.

The study was conducted via 34 semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with a subsample of participants from the 'West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study: Health in the Community', a 20-year longitudinal investigation of social inequalities in health. Participants were presented with a list of weight status terms, the interviews explored people's views on the acceptability of the weight status terms, both generally and specifically when used by a health professional, and on their effectiveness in motivating lifestyle changes.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts of the interviews. Results indicated that the term 'overweight' was generally favoured when used by health professionals to describe weight status, although participants felt it did not necessarily motivate weight loss. Participants expressed their feelings that health professionals should not use the term 'fat'. Although patients did recognise that the term 'obese' could be used in a health consultation, it was largely associated with negative connotations.

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