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Stakeholder challenges in promoting a healthy weight at the population level

There is growing critical discussion in public health settings around how we can help to address rising rates of obesity, while avoiding creating and exacerbating body dissatisfaction and associated wellbeing among people living with overweight and obesity. This tension is particularly challenging for approaches with children and adolescents. The relationship between the identification and treatment of obesity and the implications for mental health and wellbeing largely stems from the stigma surrounding obesity and excess weight, given the widespread belief in an individualised model of obesity in which individuals, rather than the obesogenic environment, are considered responsible for obesity prevalence.

One particular example of where this plays out, and a trigger for this debate, is the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) in England. The NCMP involves the weighing and measuring of children in the first and final years of primary school, and in most areas of England parents are subsequently informed by phone call or letter if a child is classified as overweight. Both the process of measurement and the implications of providing parents with feedback have been criticised. Those in support believe that parents have a right to know about their children's health risks, including excess weight, and that the NCMP and its feedback can be helpful in raising awareness, which are a likely or necessary precursor to bringing about change for that child. Those who criticise the programme contest these assumptions, and believe the NCMP could bring about harm through undermining children's wellbeing, and further endorsing the implicit (and sometimes explicit) individualised model of the development of overweight and a parent's responsibility for managing their child's weight. In some cases, the same research evidence has been drawn on to support very different arguments.

The diverse UKCO membership encompasses people with views spanning the breadth of this debate which we believe provides a very positive opportunity to explore these different stakeholder views together, and generate constructive discussion around how we can better accommodate both perspectives to enhance outcomes for people with a lived experience of obesity in our design and practice.

The symposium will start with three case study examples of where the tension between 'doing good' and 'doing no harm' in obesity prevention settings is evident. In each case, speakers will present their case study based on research and/or practice-based evidence highlighting areas of tension and where this raises challenges for providing support or services: (1) navigating diverging views of the NCMP in England, (2) the tension between eating disorders and weight management services, (3) local and national need for data and action. Finally, we will present a pre-recorded contribution from people with lived experience, provided by the Obesity Voices patient and public engagement hub at Leeds Beckett University.

Following the case studies, we will run a facilitated discussion inviting speakers and audience members to reflect on the examples, how we could deal with unintended consequences, and consider future directions. We will initiate the discussion by posing three particular questions currently facing researchers and practitioners;

UKCO 2023

Member-led Symposium Submissions

1. Can we design research that would establish the balance of benefits versus harms of population level initiatives to reduce obesity prevalence – and if we could, would this be useful?
2. How can we shift public and professional understanding from a predominantly individualised, to predominantly environmental understanding of the determinants of obesity – and is this likely a route to, or consequence of, reducing perceptions of weight-related stigma?
3. What are the pro's, con's and unintended consequences of weight neutral, more holistic wellbeing focused approaches?

Speaker 1: Professor Fiona Gillison, University of Bath

Title: Navigating diverging views of the National Child Measurement Programme in England.

Speaker 2: Dr Jordan Marwood, Leeds Beckett University

Title: Exploring the tension between eating disorders and weight management services.

Speaker 3: *name to be confirmed, agreed in principle, Local Authority public health team

Title: Dealing with the dual responsibilities of promoting a healthy weight and wellbeing.

Public reflections: Layla, lived-experience advisor from "Obesity Voices", Leeds Beckett University