Obese, fat, or just overweight?

BACKGROUND Discussing obesity with the patient without this being perceived as offensive may represent a challenge. Prevention of lifestyle diseases requires that this topic be addressed with those concerned. In this study, we investigate the patients’ sensitivity to expressions, i.e. their notions of appropriateness or inappropriateness regarding various terms for obesity, and what patient characteristics are associated with such sensitivity to expressions.

MATERIAL AND METHOD The investigation is part of a five-year study of patients in Central Norway who were treated for morbid obesity. The terms used in the study had been suggested by the Overweight Patients’ Association. Data on sensitivity to expressions were collected with the aid of a questionnaire one year after completion of the treatment.

RESULTS Altogether 157 out of 206 participants completed the questionnaire. Their average body mass index (BMI) (SD) amounted to 37.6 kg/m² (7.3 kg/m²). Their sensitivity to 14 different designations varied. «Weight», «overweight» and «weight problem» returned the best scores, whereas «obesitas», «obese» and «fat» were deemed least appropriate. The highest sensitivity to expressions was found among women, those who developed overweight early in life, those who had higher education and those who were dissatisfied with their weight.

INTERPRETATION The perceptions of various expressions for overweight and obesity varied considerably. Knowledge about this topic may be relevant for doctors and other health personnel in prevention and treatment of obesity.

In the vernacular, overweight is often synonymous with both obesity and obesity, two conditions that differ in terms of their aetiology, prognosis and treatment. Clinicians tend to use the WHO classification of body mass on the basis of the body mass index (BMI) and distinguish between overweight and varying degrees of obesity (1). In encounters with patients, finding a precise term may represent a challenge, and it is conceivable that the choice of terms may have an effect on the climate of cooperation and treatment outcome.

Many people who are overweight or obese realise that they are at risk of disease. Some of them nevertheless find it difficult to change their lifestyle. Since 66% of the population see their doctor each year, the GPs can play a key role (2). An American study shows that patients with a high body mass index more often cancel the appointment with their doctor if they are to be weighed (3). As regards the doctor, co-morbidity rather than body mass index will decide whether an issue will be made of the patient’s weight (4–6). There could be a negative association between the patient’s body mass index and the doctor’s use of time for the consultation (7). In sum, this may indicate that both the patient and the doctor tend to evade the topic of overweight, and overweight will be addressed only when complications occur.

How one’s own body size is perceived varies from one person to the next. In addition, this perception will vary according to life stage, gender (8, 9) and age (10). Moreover, there is a general tendency to under-report bodyweight (11). An increasing prevalence of overweight nowadays may help normalise this condition and cause fewer people to regard themselves as overweight.

In addition, the conversation between the doctor and the patient may be complicated by the fact that various vernacular expressions for overweight and obesity may be perceived as pejorative. Making the body an issue impinges on individual self-esteem; this is further highlighted by the prevalence of depression among people with manifest obesity (12). In general, society harbours negative attitudes to overweight, including in the health services (13). Although clinicians differ in their opinions regarding how overweight should be referred to in relation to patients (14, 15), there is little empirical knowledge in this area. Two American studies have studied patients’ sensitivity to various expressions, but differences in language and culture render the findings not immediately transferable to Norwegian conditions. No Norwegian studies have been made in this field.

In this study we have investigated the way in which Norwegian patients perceived various expressions for obesity. This is referred to as sensitivity to expressions, here understood as how appropriate or inappropriate the various designations were perceived to be. We seek to answer the following questions:

- To what extent have morbidly obese patients experienced that their obesity has been made an issue by their GP?

MAIN MESSAGE Most of the patients felt that their doctor had acted appropriately in taking the initiative for a conversation about obesity and its consequences for health. Expressions such as obesitas, obese and fat were perceived as improper, whereas weight and overweight were seen as more appropriate.

Women, people with higher education and those who developed overweight at an early stage in life were especially sensitive to these expressions.
• How inappropriate did patients with obesity deem the use of various expressions?
• Is the sensitivity to expressions related to background variables such as gender, age, education, marital status, mental health, assessment of one’s own weight and/or the stage in life when overweight first developed?

Material and method

Participants
The analysis of sensitivity to expressions was a secondary end point of a five-year study of patients who originally had been referred to St Olavs Hospital for treatment of morbid obesity. Out of 206 participants altogether 157 completed the questionnaire (response rate 76%). The questionnaire was distributed prior to the one-year examination with a request to return it on attendance, whereupon complete information was obtained for 142 patients from Central Norway. Because of the successive inclusion procedure, the study extended from 2005 to 2013. In a previous article we have described the treatment provided to these patients and its health effects (18). All the patients fulfilled the criteria for morbid obesity and had a BMI > 35 kg/m² at the time of inclusion.

The study was approved by the Central Norway Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK).

Data
The following variables were included in the analysis of sensitivity to expressions: gender, age (continuous variable), level of education (primary/secondary/vocational or upper secondary/higher education), marital status (living alone or with a partner), time of onset of overweight (childhood/adolescence or adulthood) and satisfaction with the weight loss achieved after treatment (satisfied or dissatisfied).

Furthermore, we included the dimension of social functioning from the SF-36, on the basis of the questions referring to whether the respondents’ physical health or emotional problems have had an effect on social contacts. The SF-36 is a generic instrument for measuring quality of life and contains 36 questions that permit construction of eight separate dimensions of experiences (19).

We used symptom intensity for anxiety measured with the aid of HADS (Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale) (20). Both the SF-36 and HADS (the anxiety dimension) were included in the analysis as continuous variables. The regression analysis included only the anxiety dimension from HADS, because of multicollinearity between this dimension and depression.

The choice of variables for the analysis was based on what we hypothetically assumed to play a role. The availability of variables was also determined by the framework defined by the original data in the five-year (main) study from which the investigation of expressions emerged, since this part of the study was added after the initiation of the main study.

Sensitivity to expressions
The questions pertaining to sensitivity to expressions were inspired by an American study (16). The questionnaire was developed especially for this study, and a test-retest analysis of 33 persons found a high correlation.

In the questionnaire, the patients were asked to imagine the following situation: «You are seeing your GP for a regular check-up. This happened before you were referred to the hospital for treatment of overweight. On his/her own initiative, the doctor wants to talk to you about your overweight and the consequences it may have for your health. You have not previously talked to your GP about your overweight.»

This was followed by 14 different terms for overweight or obesity that were assumed to have been used by the doctor. Each term was scored by the patient in terms of their sensitivity on a five-point scale, with response alternatives

![Figure 1: Sensitivity to expressions for 14 terms for overweight and obesity, as assessed by patients who had been treated for morbid obesity (N = 157). Bars with different letters are significantly different (p < 0.001), i.e. indicate terms that are perceived differently by the patients. Example: «Weight» is perceived differently from all other terms, while there is no difference between the perception of «overweight» and «weight problem»](image_url)

Table 1: Sociodemographic and anthropometric data for the 157 included patients, all of whom had undergone weight-loss treatment one year previously

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age [years] – average ± SD</td>
<td>42.6 ± 9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women – number [%]</td>
<td>119 [57.8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men – number [%]</td>
<td>38 [24.2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-habiting/married – number [%]</td>
<td>96 [57.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education equivalent to a bachelor’s degree or higher – number [%]</td>
<td>108 [71.5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onset of overweight in childhood/adolescence – number [%]</td>
<td>54 [35.7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI [kg/m²] – average initial value ± SD</td>
<td>45.2 ± 5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI [kg/m²] – average one year after treatment ± SD</td>
<td>37.6 ± 7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Weight**
- **Overweight**
- **Weight problem**
- **BMI**
- **Too heavy**
- **High BMI**
- **Too stout**
- **Excess weight**
- **Morbid overweight**
- **Too big**
- **Obesity**
- **Obesitas**
- **Obese**
- **Fat**

Very inappropriate

Sensitivity to expressions

Very appropriate
natives ranging from *very inappropriate* (−2) to *very appropriate* (+2). The terms were collected from the Overweight Patients’ Association, which had been requested to provide designations that could be perceived as either positively or negatively charged. Expressions that are primarily used as terms of abuse were excluded.

The following terms were included in the questionnaire, in this order: «overweight, «weight problem», «BMI», «high BMI», «obesity», «morbid obesity», «obesitas», «excess weight», «too heavy», «obese», «fat», «big», « stout» and «weight». The highest sensitivity to expressions was «fat» (NO: «feit») was deemed the most inappropriate term with an average score of 1.14; «excess weight» scored –1.03 (± 1.2). The next five inappropriate terms were «too heavy» with 0.68 (± 1.1); «too big» with 0.37 (± 1.3); «obesitas» with 0.28 (± 1.4) and «BMI» with 0.27 (± 1.2) and «too stou» with 0.24 (± 1.2). «Fat» (NO: «feit») was deemed the most inappropriate term with an average score of −1.20 (± 1.2). Moreover, «fat» differed significantly from «obese» (NO: «fet»), which scored −1.03 (± 1.2). The next five scores were not significantly different: «obesitas» −0.56 (± 1.2); «obesity» −0.51 (± 1.4); «too big» −0.37 (± 1.3); «morbidly obese» –0.28 (± 1.4) and «excess weight» –0.23 (± 1.3).

The highest sensitivity to expressions was found among men, who developed overweight in early life and those who were dissatisfied with their weight (Table 2). Age, marital status, anxiety symptoms and social functioning status did not achieve significance in the model. The regression is based on those 142 participants for whom we had complete data.

**Discussion**

Our study shows that many patients felt it to be appropriate for the doctor to initiate a conversation on overweight and obesity. At the same time, the patients were sensitive to a number of terms that describe obesity. Many respondents claimed that a wrong choice of words has a negative impact on their relationship to the doctor. As noted above, women had the highest sensitivity to expressions, as well as those who developed overweight early in life, those who had higher education and those who were dissatisfied with their weight.

One in every three patients reported that the doctor had taken the initiative to talk about obesity. Taking the patients’ considerable weight into account, this is a low figure. Another study has shown that weight was a topic in only 17% of consultations with overweight patients (21). Moreover, notions may vary among patients and doctors as to whether the topic of weight has been raised at all during the consultation. One study found that patients far more rarely than doctors thought that weight had been referred to. The largest discrepancy in opinion was found among patients who had made little effort to lose weight by themselves.
follow-up of treatment for obesity. On this hood will hardly internalise social norms as stigmatisation because of overweight (27), this can be traced back to experiences of being sensitive to expressions. Most likely, this theory does not legitimise uncritical use of terms when the therapeutic relationship is about to cease or otherwise does not emphasise any change in health-related behaviour. In isolation, offensive terms may produce the reverse of their intended effect on the sensitivity to expressions and thus on the results.

In our opinion, the findings are relevant – especially for GPs. They often observe their patients’ weight increase and one of their tasks is prevention. Knowledge about the perception of language usage may lower the threshold for raising the issue of body weight at an early stage, thus increasing the effectiveness of prevention.

The research fund at Unimed Innovation and St. Olavs Hospital have granted financial support for this study.

Magnus Strømmen (born 1973)
PhD student in clinical medicine, M.Sc. and research nurse. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Inger Johanne Bakken (born 1968)
dr.ing. in biophysics and medical technology and senior advisor in registry epidemiology at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.
Ellen Andenæs (born 1951) associate professor of applied linguistics, head of the Section for Linguistic Communication and coordinator for the research group on health communication and ethics, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Christian A. Klöckner (born 1972) professor of social psychology and quantitative methods and methodology consultant at the Centre of Obesity Research. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Ronald Mårvik (born 1949) specialist in gastroenterology and general surgery, senior consultant. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Bård Kulseng (born 1951) specialist in endocrinology, head of the Centre of Obesity Research. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Are Holen (born 1945) specialist in psychiatry and professor. The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

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Received 27 June 2014, first revision submitted 2 December 2014, accepted 14 September 2015. Editor: Tor Rosness.