An Examination of Nursing Biases that Affect Care to Obese Clients: An Integrative Literature Review

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An Examination of Nursing Biases that Affect Care to Obese Clients
An Integrative Review of Literature

**Background:**
Obesity is a global public health problem and within the U.S., rates of obesity have increased from 33.7% to 39.8% of the total population between the years 2007-2008 and 2015-2016 (CDC, 2018). These statistics indicate a growing number of Americans are obese, and individuals who are obese are at risk for non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and certain cancers (WHO, 2018). Patients who are obese and concurrently have other chronic health problems utilize and seek out health care professionals more often, precipitating encounters of discrimination from a weight-biased society.

Research concluded that health professionals, including nurses, exhibit a significant pro-thin, anti-fat bias which indicate a strong weight related prejudice (Schwartz, Chambliss, Brownell, Blair, & Billington, 2003; Poon & Tarrant, 2009; Bombak, 2014; Gómez-Pérez, Ortiz, & Saiz, 2017). Due to this bias, many obese individuals admit to experiencing judgmental attitudes or discrimination from healthcare workers and report feelings of fear, shame, and being misunderstood by their healthcare team (Schwartz, Chambliss, Brownell, Blair, & Billington, 2003; Poon & Tarrant, 2009; Bombak, 2014; Gómez-Pérez, Ortiz, & Saiz, 2017).

**Problem Statement:**
Nurses are the main educators on health promotion as well as informing and assisting all patients with their conditions, medications, and lifestyle changes. If nurses exhibit negative biases towards the obese population, the quality of care provided to these individuals could be compromised as well as the development of the therapeutic relationship. Understanding nurses’ attitudes towards obese patients is necessary in order to be effective healthcare providers to their patients and provide the high-quality care to the public. This literature review examines the data related to obesity and nurse biases as well as explores the best practices on interventions to improve the care provided to obese clients while overcoming these biases.

**Research Question:**
How do biases that nurses in the hospital setting possess toward obese clients affect their care delivery to this population?

**Conceptual Framework:**
The main purpose of this literature review is to examine nursing biases towards obese clients. A conceptual framework that closely ties with this question is Goffman’s Theory of Stigma Related to Obesity Bias. There are three types of stigma, 1. Physical characteristics that deem an individual different, 2. Generalized undesirable characteristic traits attributed to the population, and 3. Stigma involving group affiliation (Burke, 2018). These forms of stigma stem from societal and historical beliefs. When providers and nurses bring these attitudes in to the hospital setting, it can lead the obese patient to avoid care and experience stress with healthcare staff, leading to poor communication and adherence to the patient teaching provided by the nurse.

**Methods:**
A computerized search of literature was implemented using Rosalind Franklin University Boxer Library database and DePaul University database. The databases searched included PubMed and Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL). Complete, respectively. For PubMed and CINAHL, the following key words were used in the search: obesity, AND attitude of health personnel.

Inclusion criteria: Sources reviewed were limited to peer-reviewed articles to include the most relevant data from 2008 to 2018; the article must have a nursing or medical focus; the article must be in full text format; the article must be in English; the age range of adult 19+ or all adults; and the article must be focusing on nurses as the study subject.

Exclusion criteria: Due to differing definitions and experiences, articles reviewing the pediatric obese patient population and pregnant women living with obesity were not included. Articles published outside of ten years were excluded as well. Sources which did not include information addressing nursing biases towards obese patients in the hospital setting or evidence based methods to deterring nursing biases were excluded. The articles were reviewed by title, and the titles that did not address the topic were excluded from the search.

**Results & Discussion:**
After reviewing 15 articles for this study, biases towards obese clients were identified, the impact of these biases were determined, and solutions to combating these biases have been explored.

Biases towards obese clients stemmed from the belief that weight control is under the individual’s control and would lead to higher care intensity and more resources would need to be allocated. Thoughts of laziness, stupidity, noncompliance, less healthy, and gluttonous have been reported in studies (Tanneberger & Cipuitu-Plath, 2018).

The impact of these biases is the perceived thought that higher nursing care is required by this patient population and that care would be given out of disapproval or condemnation due to the thoughts that obese patients were “unattractive” or having an unpleasant body odor (Tanneberger & Cipuitu-Plath, 2018). These biases impact the use of health care services by this population by canceling or delaying appointments after experiencing negative attitudes, disinterested attention, and a smaller amount of equipment being used during care (Fruh et al., 2016).

Lastly, this literature review identified several solutions to combat healthcare provider/worker biases. Using appropriate language that is less stigmatizing, avoid placing blame on the patient, identifying your own biases, and possible activities such as wearing a bariatric suit for the day to provide empathic experiences to workers.

**Nursing Practice Implications:**
Nurses are an integral part of the patient’s experience, leading in the amount of time spent with patients at bedside. Through professional training, nurses should understand that obesity is a complex process composed of a combination of factors. Nurses who harbor negative thoughts and biases towards obese patients affects the quality of care being provided. Nurses need to be aware of their biases towards obese clients and how their attitudes affects the care being provided in order to ensure this patient population does not experience devastating effects psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Exploring ways to reduce biases will ensure better hospitalization and adherence outcomes.