

## Original Article

# Adults' perceptions of being overweight or obese: a focus group study

Ching Thon Chang MNsg<sup>1</sup>, Kam Hock Chang PhD<sup>1</sup> and Whye Lian Cheah MSc<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Nursing, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia<sup>2</sup>Department of Community Medicine & Public Health, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

The objective of this study was to explore the perception of, feelings and attitudes toward overweight or obesity, and the perceived barriers to weight loss among native adults from lower socio-economic background. A total of six gender- and ethnic-specific focus groups consisted of 38 overweight and obese purposefully and criterion selected adults (21 women and 17 men), participated in this study. An unstructured discussion guide based on the study objectives were used for the focus groups. The results showed that some participants perceived themselves as ugly, felt ashamed of their body size and were frustrated because they did not desire to be overweight. Due to their excess weight, most also expressed they were less effective in their work performances. Although some participants had negative attitudes toward themselves because of excess weight, this appeared to link to self-stigmatization rather than anti-obesity discrimination. The participants remained in the Pre-contemplation stage of losing weight probably because of perceived barriers such as difficulty to resist eating, lack of know how and previous failed attempts to lose weight. Importantly, this study provided some evidence that individuals in the Pre-contemplation stage are unable to take action to lose weight, even if effective strategies are suggested.

**Key Words:** overweight and obese natives, rural community, purposive sample, focus groups, Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian non-communicable disease surveillance of 2005/2006 reported that 16.3% of Malaysian adults aged 25-64 years were obese,<sup>1</sup> representing a four-fold increase in the prevalence of obesity in 10 years (4.4% in 1996, Malaysia Ministry of Health [MOH]), and an approximate two-fold increase in overweight (from 16.6% to 30% in 1996 and 2006, respectively). In response to this situation, the "Guideline for prevention of obesity in Malaysia" was jointly drawn up by the Malaysian Association for Obesity Study (MASO), MOH, Malaysian Nutrition Association, Malaysian Dieticians' Association and others in 2004<sup>2</sup> to guide health care workers. However, the prevalence of overweight and obesity continue to increase.

This upward trend of overweight and obesity in Malaysia is of concern, due to the influence of substantial weight gain on chronic diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and stroke. The problem is pervasive, being found equally in urban and rural populations.<sup>3,4</sup> Another two studies found overweight and obesity affected rural populations in Malaysia.<sup>5,6</sup> Ng *et al.*<sup>5</sup> found that 23.5% of male and 46.0% of female adults had an overweight problem and exemplify that the mild to moderate forms of obesity have reached alarming proportions in rural adult populations. In another study of 4600 rural villagers throughout Peninsula Malaysia, Khor *et al.*<sup>6</sup> found a overweight prevalence of 19.8% (BMI 25-29.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) in males, and 28.0% in females; while obesity (BMI >30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) was present in 4.2% of male and 11.1% of female respondents.

Two contributing factors to overweight and obesity: people were unconcerned about their excessive weight,<sup>7</sup> or that they did not perceive themselves as overweight were identified in Australia.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a Malaysian study found that 21.7% of obese subjects perceived themselves to have a normal weight and, thus, had no intention of losing weight.<sup>9</sup>

For those overweight or obese individuals who intend to lose weight, the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) is ideally suited to suggest how a change in body weight may occur.<sup>10</sup> The TTM's key construct, the Stages of Change (SOC), classified individuals into one of the five stages, Pre-contemplation, when individuals are not thinking about changing a behaviour (e.g. losing weight).<sup>10</sup> This occurs because individuals may be ignorant of the effects of their behaviour, or unwilling to attempt change due to previous failed attempts.<sup>11</sup> Contemplation describes individuals who are thinking of changing a behaviour in the next six months because they are aware of their problem<sup>10</sup> Preparation describes individuals who plan to change a behaviour in the next 30 days<sup>10</sup> and have already made an attempt recently to do so.<sup>11</sup> Individuals in this stage may

**Corresponding Author:** Ching Thon Chang, Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Lot 77, Seksyen 22 KTLTD, Jalan Tun Ahmad Zaidi Adruce, 93150 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia  
Tel: +6082 292286; Fax: +6082 422564  
Email: ccthon@fmhs.unimas.my  
Manuscript received 24 June 2008. Initial review completed 14 March 2009. Revision accepted 20 March 2009.