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Commentary on the Obesity Epidemic: A Family Medicine Perspective

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Weight loss. Two words that primary care physicians find themselves discussing with patients on a regular basis. With the obesity epidemic at an all-time high it is crucial for physicians to be well versed in counseling patients. Although I had previously read about several factors that contribute to obesity such as limited resources, mental health conditions, and social determinants of health, it was an entirely different experience to try and navigate them in a thirty-minute appointment. There was one patient encounter halfway through residency that truly opened my eyes to the complexity of the matter. I met this patient for the first time for “medication refills” and we discussed her two blood pressure medications. Upon reviewing her vitals, I noticed her significantly elevated BMI. I thought it was my duty to dig deeper to try to help her establish healthier lifestyle habits as her new PCP and I attempted to peel back different layers of her weight journey up to that point. In one visit, we talked about her anxiety, depression, PTSD, financial insecurity due to intimate partner violence, non-compliance with CPAP machine for obstructive sleep apnea, and history of eating disorder at a younger age. I felt a bit overwhelmed at first to say the least and by the end of the appointment, I did not know where to start or which of these to address first. I advised her to return for follow-up visits to attempt to tackle these different factors in a piecemeal approach as they were likely contributing in some part to her elevated BMI. Since that appointment with me, the patient has returned several times and we continue to work together to get her to be the healthiest version of herself with the aid of mental health therapy and medications, nutrition therapy, weight loss medications, and CPAP compliance among others.

Another experience that opened my eyes to the complexity of weight loss occurred this year while preparing for my grand rounds presentation. My topic was on obesity and weight management interventions. During my preparations I read about “Behav-

ioral Therapy” and it piqued my interest as it went beyond diet and exercise. The chapter focused on how eating and physical activity behaviors are affected by multiple factors including all five senses, mental stress, environment, emotions, reward factors, information gap, and eating disorders.¹ Although it may take more time to go into these details, I think it is crucial to consider the behavioral aspect of why patients may not lose weight or have difficulty maintaining weight loss. This section reminded me of my patient who started off with several mental health barriers keeping her from making lifestyle changes. As we addressed the behavioral aspects, she was able to make choices which will ultimately help her on her weight loss journey.

After reflecting on my patient’s story and reading more about behavioral therapy, I have gained a greater appreciation for how important it is for physicians to take the time to listen to patients. The BMI that appears in the vitals section is just a number, but patient’s histories, although complex at times, are part of who they are and may contribute to why they have made certain decisions in their lives. Often, a primary care physician is limited to a fifteen or thirty minute visit and it may take more than one visit to identify the root cause of an issue or to work on correcting it. PCPs are at an advantage with continuity of care which allows us to establish trust and rapport with patients over time and assist with dissolving barriers they may be experiencing. Although this story is specific to one patient’s weight loss journey, the message extends to chronic conditions and other parts of preventative medicine. Soon I will graduate from residency and acquire a higher volume of patients. With this expansion, I aim to remind myself to pause and listen to what patients are really saying and what their past life experiences contribute to their current health, as those may be the key to their future health success.

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