

# Factors influencing GP referral of patients with obesity

From: Kim KK, Yeong L-L, Caterson ID, Harris MF. Analysis of factors influencing general practitioners' decision to refer obese patients in Australia: a qualitative study. BMC Family Practice. 2015;16(45). doi: 10.1186/s12875-015-0262-5.

## Highlights:

- **Lifestyle interventions:** GPs were concerned about the effectiveness of lifestyle interventions, but most were ready to refer to them. Perceived barriers to referral were of patient motivation and health literacy.
- **Bariatric surgery:** GPs infrequently referred patients for surgery; when they did this was mostly at the request of the patient. Barriers to referral included ability of the patient to pay, patients reacting negatively to the suggestion, and previous negative experience with complications or failures.
- **Implications:** Better communication and information on the outcomes of referral to local health needs to be provided to GPs.

## Background

Although there is evidence that lifestyle and surgical interventions can be effective in reducing risk, many patients with obesity are not referred for to lifestyle and surgical interventions.

## Study aim

To describe the factors influencing general practitioners' (GPs) referral intentions for their patients with obesity.

## Study method

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 GPs from four geographically different areas in NSW.

## Results

Factors influencing GPs referral of patients with obesity to lifestyle interventions included:

- GP attitudes, e.g. belief in the effectiveness of the referred intervention
- GPs' own experiences of managing their weight
- Patient variables e.g. motivation, health literacy, ability to pay, comorbidity
- The capacity of the practice e.g. practice nurse capacity
- The availability, accessibility and cost of referral options

Factors influencing GP referral for bariatric surgery included:

- GP beliefs e.g. about its effectiveness and the competence of the surgeons and their teams
- Patient expectations or requests
- Past experiences with patients in relation to weight regain or serious side effects following the surgery
- Cost and availability: All GPs reported that surgery was virtually unavailable in public hospitals.

## Discussion

More intensive interventions are required to assist obese patients to lose weight in addition to assessment, brief advice and goal setting. This usually requires referral. The major barrier for lifestyle referrals was doubt about their effectiveness and patient motivation. For surgical referrals the main barriers were cost and patient expectations. For both referrals, GP's were informed by limited previous case experience and feedback.

## Policy implications

Referral could be improved by local health services providing better information back to GPs about the outcomes of referrals.