

Are words weighing down the development of policy for better health?

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Unrealistic and uninformed media portrayals of weight not only can negatively influence individual behavior, but can impact how policymakers approach issues of weight and health. The result, according to experts from the Strategies to Overcome and Prevent (STOP) Obesity Alliance and the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), is a continued belief that these issues are largely a matter of personal responsibility and that little can or should be done in policy to address them.

Susan Dentzer, editor of [Health Affairs](#), moderated a panel convened today on Capitol Hill to discuss the media's role in shaping the policy environment surrounding weight and health. Panelists discussed whether policymakers believe that weight is an individual issue or a public health problem and whether media plays a role in driving who is responsible and who should take action.

"In a time of ongoing budget tightening and confusion regarding [health care coverage](#), we must find a way to create policies that address obesity and [eating disorders](#), without letting our own biases get in the way," said Christine Ferguson, J.D., Director of the STOP Obesity Alliance. "There is no evidence that stigmatizing weight-related [health issues](#) prevents or treats these problems – in fact, the opposite appears to be true. It is an important opportunity for members of both the obesity and eating disorders communities to advocate for a focus on health rather than weight as a measure of well-being."

The groups released a new analysis of media coverage that showed room to improve the reporting on weight and health, based on a series of media guidelines released by the STOP Obesity Alliance and NEDA last year.

The guidelines offer simple message themes to include when addressing weight and focus on the concept that weight status and the importance of maintaining a healthy weight is not about appearance, but about health. A comparison of coverage from sample outlets over the last year however – looking at media that target a "Beltway" audience and those that are more consumer oriented – found that 75 percent of articles initially reviewed were dismissed from the analysis because they lacked substantive content. While many consumer articles focused on weight-loss tips, characterized as "fighting flab", "shrinking your middle" or "looking leaner naked", most failed to mention the health implications.

"Our conversation today and the new media analysis echo the ongoing need for us to address the societal pressures and the unrealistic images that we know can be contributing factors among people who develop eating disorders, depression and other esteem issues," said Lynn Grefe, President and CEO of NEDA. "It is why we have come together to address these issues. These pressures affect all of us."

The media analysis also found that Beltway media publications were three times as likely to consider external factors beyond will power as playing a role in, and being affected by, weight issues. Examples of this were a higher rate of coverage in Beltway outlets that reported on how weight issues can impact the economy and the workplace.

The roundtable discussion, "Pounds and Policy: Effectively Communicating About [Weight](#) and Health" also included experts from a cross-section of fields including media, communications, eating disorders and obesity:

- Jean Kilbourne, EdD, media critic, author and expert on advertising and women
- Sarah Kliff, health reporter POLITICO
- Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD, Professor, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota
- Rebecca Puhl, PhD, Director of Research, Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University
- Chevese Turner, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Binge Eating Disorders Association

The STOP [Obesity](#) Alliance and NEDA will continue work and outreach to the media and policymakers regarding the joint guidelines.

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