Internet could help nurses treat obesity, say researchers

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(Medical Xpress) -- Nurses and patients could be given more support to reduce the amount of obesity in today's society through internet-based resources, according to research at the University of Southampton.

Obesity levels are constantly rising in the UK and are a major threat to public health. There are many initiatives to drive down the numbers of overweight people, yet there is little research into how computers and the internet can assist primary care nurses when treating people in need of losing weight.

However a project, the Positive Online Weight Reduction (POWeR) project, being carried out by the University of Southampton, is assessing what support the internet can provide.

Paul Little, Professor in Primary Care Research at the University who is leading the project, comments: "Obesity is one of the major public health threats of our time. The internet could potentially provide an ideal way to give patients interactive advice based on their personal situation and progress, with the support of a nurse to oversee, encourage and advise patients as necessary. At present nurses do not have the time to provide the intensive support needed to address the problem, and this could be a cost-effective way of filling this gap in provision."

The project has already designed, developed and piloted an obesity management website to support both practice nurses and obese patients in weight loss and weight maintenance. It addresses the most common

motivational beliefs, allowing patients to select information relevant to their own concerns. Preliminary results of the pilot study, which was funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Research for Patient Benefit programme, show that the internet gives valuable support to both nurses and patients.

Professor Little and his team, has now received and additional £1million grant from the NIHR Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme to carry out a study that will extend the website and assess the effectiveness of nurse-led intervention, with the aid of internet-based resources.

The study will recruit 660 patients with a body mass index of more than 30. A third of the patients will receive 'intensive' nursing support as well as access to the website. Another third of patients will work through the website and be prompted to use it by email but will have 'minimal' contact with nurses. The remaining third will have usual care - brief advice by a practice nurse and follow-up appointments for weighing. The success of the research will be judged by the extent to which weight loss can be achieved and maintained and by the estimated cost effectiveness of each approach.

The study also aims to explore the further development of the website for the possibility of use in other contexts, for example a library, ensuring the treatment is accessible to people without a computer at home.

Professor Little adds: "To date there has been relatively little successful exploitation of modern technology in obesity management, particularly the use of computers and the web, which could potentially provide a sophisticated, effective personalised intervention and monitoring for very low costs. The intervention has already received positive feedback during piloting and, assuming the main study can confirm and extend our

preliminary findings, it has the potential to make an important difference in the management of <u>obesity</u> in everyday practice."

Provided by University of Southampton