

# Study aims to teach future doctors how to help patients manage their weight

June 1 2016, by Bob Shepard

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Credit: University of Alabama at Birmingham

Losing weight is one of the keys to improving health, but medical schools traditionally do not offer adequate opportunities to prepare future physicians to help their patients lose weight. Now, researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a consortium of other institutions are working to teach medical students the skills needed to

help patients manage their weight.

The project, Weight Management Counseling in Medical Schools or MSWeight, is spearheaded by the University of Massachusetts Medical School, which has received a five-year, \$4 million grant from the National Cancer Institute to conduct a [randomized controlled trial](#) with UAB and eight other medical or health professional schools to compare the effectiveness of an enhanced curriculum to traditional education for [weight management](#) counseling skills.

"The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and the American Association of Medical Colleges, among other organizations, recommend that physicians intervene and provide weight management counseling to patients with overweight or obesity; but physicians report limited skill training to do so," said Taraneh Soleymani, M.D., assistant professor in the UAB Department of Nutrition Sciences. "Medical schools currently offer few opportunities for students to learn about weight management counseling. In response to this gap, this study will develop and test a comprehensive, integrated and competency-based multimodal curriculum designed to help medical students develop weight management counseling skills."

Soleymani, principal investigator at the UAB site, says that while UAB has ramped up obesity education for medical students in the past few years, much more needs to be done nationwide. Soleymani is the course director for the UAB School of Medicine elective course titled "Obesity, Clinical Nutrition, and Food Policy" which is designed to teach medical students the complexities of obesity and its management.

Starting in the first year and continuing into the third year, the MSWeight curriculum will include a web-based curriculum with faculty-led discussions; interactive counseling practice sessions online and in the classroom; and an enhanced family medicine or internal medicine

clerkship where preceptors also will learn to use weight management counseling skills in order to model, observe and further train the medical students.

The curriculum will further address the sensitive topic of weight bias: the inclination for health care providers to form unreasonable judgments based on a person's weight.

"Our goal is to not only enhance weight management counseling skills and increase obesity treatment knowledge, but also bring awareness of personal weight biases and their negative influence on weight management counseling," Soleymani said.

Refined with extensive input from patients and medical students, the multimodal curriculum and pilot are based on the success of UMass professors Judith Ockene and Rashelle Hayes' MSQuit study testing methods for teaching [medical students](#) how to address tobacco-use cessation with patients. Also funded by the National Cancer Institute, MSQuit was conducted at 10 medical schools.

Published online by the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, "Teaching Medical Students to Help Patients Quit Smoking: Outcomes of a 10-School Randomized Controlled Trial" found that students who had enhanced training reported greater confidence in their ability to counsel patients about tobacco dependence behaviors compared to students who received traditional education.

**More information:** Judith K. Ockene et al. Teaching Medical Students to Help Patients Quit Smoking: Outcomes of a 10-School Randomized Controlled Trial, *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (2015). [DOI: 10.1007/s11606-015-3508-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-015-3508-y)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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