

Weight bias among health care students could impact future care

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New Curtin University-led research has found Australian health care students often hold negative attitudes and beliefs towards people living with obesity, which could lead to poor clinical care outcomes.

The research, titled "Explicit and implicit weight bias among [health](#) care students: a cross-sectional study of 39 Australian universities," published in the journal *eClinicalMedicine*, surveyed 900 health care students across 39 Australian universities and found students held explicit and implicit weight-biased attitudes and beliefs, were fearful of "gaining weight" and lacked confidence in [clinical settings](#) when helping patients living with overweight.

Lead researcher and Ph.D. [student](#) Ravisha Jayawickrama, from the Curtin School of Population Health, said individuals who were on the receiving end of weight bias or discrimination around the world had a 60% greater risk of mortality and were 2.5 times more likely to experience [mental health disorders](#), such as anxiety.

"Our study found the level of weight bias exhibited by Australian health care students was alarming and has the potential to negatively impact the care that people living with [obesity](#) receive, contributing to poor health outcomes and quality of life. These impacts could include spending less time in consultations, raising unwarranted concerns about a patient's weight, and being unwilling to perform certain examinations," Miss Jayawickrama said.

"Students surveyed believed that obesity was within a person's control and that they lacked willpower, while some expressed dislike towards people living with overweight or obesity. We also found [male students](#) were more likely to explicitly state their bias toward these groups, and while females expressed greater empathy for these patients, they held a greater fear of 'gaining weight' themselves.

"A smaller number of students did express empathy for people living with obesity and were more likely to view them with compassion, understand their emotions, and the ongoing challenges they face when trying to lose weight and maintain [weight loss](#)."

Senior co-author Dr. Blake Lawrence, also from the Curtin School of Population Health, said by 2025 it is expected that 23% of the global and 35% of the Australian adult population will be living with obesity.

"Australian health care students are going to be future health practitioners, doctors and nurses, so it is critical that educators and universities play a key role in reducing this stigma and weight bias exhibited by these students," Dr. Lawrence said.

"Given the predicted rise in obesity, we need to better educate our students, health care trainees and practicing professionals on the negative impact of weight bias to enhance the Australian healthcare system. No individual, no matter their weight, color, gender or ethnicity, should experience discrimination when seeking medical attention.

"We need to support students to develop the skills and abilities that will enable overweight and obese people to be treated with equity and dignity in health care settings."

More information: Ravisha S. Jayawickrama et al, Explicit and implicit weight bias among health care students: a cross-sectional study of 39 Australian universities, *eClinicalMedicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eclinm.2023.101894](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2023.101894)

Provided by Curtin University

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