



The Obesity Policy Engagement Network (OPEN)
Global Initiative to Further National Action on Obesity
Introduction to OPEN and OPEN EU

Current situation

In Europe, obesity has tripled since 1980¹, and in 2014 more than 224 million adults were affected by being overweight, of which almost 80 million had obesity.² High body mass index (BMI) is responsible for 10-13% of deaths in different parts of Europe,³ making it the 4th most important risk factor for ill health and premature deaths in Europe.⁴ Obesity is a leading cause of other diseases including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers⁵ such as colorectal and pancreatic cancer,⁶ and it reduces healthy life-years due to morbidity and disability.⁷ All are factors which contribute to obesity accounting for 2-8% of health costs in different parts of Europe.³ With over 650 million people living with obesity worldwide,⁸ obesity has become the number one health challenge facing governments and societies today. Predictions indicate that if effective solutions are not urgently identified which address the many causes and barriers along the patient life course, approximately 1.12 billion people worldwide will have obesity by 2030.⁹

Through the past few decades it has become evident that the high prevalence of obesity not only impacts individuals but places a significant burden on the wider health and wellbeing of society.^{10,11,12,13} People with obesity have a decreased life expectancy,¹¹ increased risk of multiple complications,¹⁰ and experience detrimental effects on mental health and social interactions.¹⁴ All have economic consequences for society through direct and indirect costs to healthcare systems¹³ and lost productivity.¹⁵

Obesity has long been the subject of stigma and misconceptions,^{16,17} but contrary to popular belief, obesity cannot simply be attributed to overconsumption and lack of exercise.^{18,19,20} Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition amongst the scientific community of obesity as a multifactorial chronic relapsing disease requiring long-term management.^{21,22} However, despite the growing evidence underpinning the need for shared responsibility and whole-system support, obesity is still widely considered to be the responsibility of the individual by governments, healthcare systems and people with obesity.^{16,23}

As a result, obesity remains significantly underdiagnosed and undertreated, and the majority of current obesity strategies focus on prevention or interventions with an emphasis on diet and exercise.^{24,25,26} While these strategies are important in the wider fight against obesity, they do not fully address the complex nature of obesity and thereby effectively support people living with the disease.²⁷

Obesity is not a new health challenge, but a different approach is urgently needed; one that recognises that obesity is a complex chronic relapsing disease, for which multidisciplinary, holistic strategies should be prioritised to ensure that effective support is provided to people with obesity.²⁷

The Obesity Challenge



In Europe
~80 million adults
are living with obesity²



236 disorders
are associated with obesity
including type 2 diabetes,
cardiovascular disease and
certain cancers²⁹



By 2030
up to 1.12 billion people
worldwide are predicted to
have obesity if no further
action is taken³



High BMI
is responsible for 10-13 %
of deaths in parts of Europe³

Welcome to OPEN

In an effort to address the complex nature of obesity and help to reverse the obesity epidemic, the Obesity Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) was established in November 2018. The OPEN network is a global platform for national public health, policy, patient representatives and other thought leaders in the field of obesity from across the world. OPEN seeks to provide members with the opportunity to come together to gain diverse perspectives on a common challenge, and identify how policy makers, patients, and those involved in health systems can collaborate to drive national action that enable health systems and society to put in place interventions which will effectively address obesity nationally.

The OPEN mission

Overall the aim of OPEN is to identify and support the implementation of a whole-systems approach that effectively addresses the causes of obesity and ensure people living with obesity have access to effective treatment and management of their disease throughout their life course.

Specifically, the network seeks to explore and address the following critical areas of focus:

1

Obtain governmental, clinical and public recognition of obesity as a chronic relapsing disease to ensure responsibility moves from individual to shared

- Myths and misconceptions of obesity are prevalent in the media, popular culture and scientific literature, representing people with obesity as lazy, unhealthy and unmotivated individuals^{29,30,31}
- At the root of the problem is the belief that obesity is a lifestyle choice which is due to poor self-discipline and lack of motivation¹⁷
- The presence of stigma can result in poorly-informed clinical decisions, inaccurate public health recommendations and unproductive allocation of limited resources³²
- For individuals with obesity, stigmatisation is associated with greater psychological distress and more severe obesity³³
- Not diagnosing and then treating obesity like any other chronic disease requiring holistic interventions - which combine lifestyle modifications with behavioural therapy, pharmacotherapy and, in certain cases, surgery – translates into a vicious cycle of inaction and increases risk of obesity-related complications in people with obesity^{17,27}

2

Review and optimise allocation of healthcare resources to secure funding for care

- Obesity is not a new issue and vast resources are being spent on obesity-related complications and disorders³⁴
- Current clinical pathways do not enable healthcare practitioners to diagnose how people come to have obesity and then effectively track obesity, leading to insufficient funding and clinical guidance^{35,36}
- A 5-10% loss of body weight can reduce the severity or risk of complications and result in moderate improvements in physical function, self-esteem and health related quality of life, as well as reduce costs to the healthcare system and society as a whole^{37,38,39}
- Reviewing and reprioritising current funding and care pathways to focus on obesity as a condition/specialism, has the potential for great savings as it will enable the treatment of obesity and the prevention of obesity-related complications

3

Integrate obesity to learning curricula across obesity-related professions to support more effective, informed care

- Weight bias amongst health care practitioners (HCPs) is impairing the care of people with obesity^{16,17}
- The current lack of understanding of obesity has resulted in several barriers to effective clinical management, including poor knowledge among HCPs,⁴⁰ poor patient-HCP communication,^{41,42} limited availability and adoption of treatment options^{35,43} and insufficient reimbursement for obesity management⁴³
- Lack of education and guidance leave most HCPs ill-equipped to effectively communicate with patients and provide appropriate diagnosis and treatment^{40,42}
- People with obesity who report not receiving a formal diagnosis and provision of continuous external support have a lower chance of reporting weight loss success^{43,44,45}
- Failed attempts to lose weight result in decreased motivation and confidence which negatively affect weight and overall health^{43,46}

4

Establish multidisciplinary obesity centres and ensure access to transdisciplinary care for people with obesity

- Obesity is a complex multifactorial chronic disease which is influenced by genetic, physiological, environmental, psychological and socioeconomic factors^{18,19,20}
- Obesity is associated with 236 disorders, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer²⁸
- Due to obesity being a risk factor for many other disorders, acknowledging and treating obesity as the primary disease provides an opportunity to tackle the many associated complications and minimises the pressures on healthcare systems and patients
- Acknowledging obesity as a disease would help to facilitate clinical pathways that would enable general physicians to take a more active role in managing people with obesity. In turn, this would reduce pressures on specialist services

OPEN EU

OPEN EU is a new initiative within OPEN, launched in 2020, which seeks to ensure that all relevant European institutional strategies and policies integrate measures that effectively help support people living with obesity.

OPEN EU aims to unite key EU experts, policy and decision makers covering a wide range of areas including disability, urban planning, sports, healthcare, industry and public health amongst others.

The intention of the coalition is to work together to implement a cross-cutting policy approach at an EU level which seeks to ensure that all relevant European institutional strategies and policies integrate measures that effectively help support people living with obesity. A focus will be to ensure EU nations are empowered and able to provide people living with obesity access to fair, effective obesity treatment and management.

OPEN EU is part of the global OPEN network which includes national coalitions in over 15 countries including the UK, Italy, Germany and Spain. All coalitions work together, as well as independently, to address national challenges and identify policy opportunities that will help ensure obesity is tackled as the chronic relapsing disease that it is and people living with obesity have the support needed to manage their weight long-term.

With four coalitions at a national level across the EU, and in light of the cross-cutting nature of the policy approach needed for effective obesity treatment and management, the time is right to act at EU level. As the European Commission shifts towards a mission-oriented approach to policy portfolios, EU institutions are uniquely placed to make a positive contribution as a community.

The OPEN commitment

OPEN and OPEN EU are long-term initiatives, and as part of the network you will gain the opportunity to connect with your fellow members throughout the year to discuss progress, further elevate activities on obesity and implement action.

OPEN will continue to grow and combine diverse perspectives. Through the network you will therefore continuously get a chance to identify new ways to deliver meaningful change in the way obesity is viewed and managed and have a positive impact on people with obesity, healthcare systems and society at large.

Together and through targeted policy initiatives and action plans, we believe we can drive the understanding and need for a whole-systems approach to obesity and help to successfully reduce rates of obesity and associated complications both in Europe and globally.

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