



The Obesity Policy Engagement Network Singapore (OPEN SG)

*A national initiative to drive meaningful change for
people with obesity in Singapore*

Inaugural Meeting Report | 3 August 2022

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Executive Summary

The Obesity Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) was established globally in November 2018, to convene public health experts, policymakers, patient representatives and other leading experts to improve care for people with obesity (PwO).

In support of OPEN, a regional OPEN Southeast Asia (SEA) was launched in November 2021 to advance regional and national policy advocacy.

Following the successful establishment of OPEN SEA, a national chapter for Singapore (SG), OPEN SG, was established with the inaugural meeting held on 3 August 2022 to:

- Bring together obesity experts, policy advocates, people with lived experiences and relevant stakeholders to discuss solutions to increase the recognition of obesity as an urgent health topic.
- Advocate for governmental, clinical and public recognition of the urgent need to modify the obesity ecosystem to further support the prevention and treatment of obesity.
- Enhance obesity education and training of healthcare professionals.
- Support national efforts to ensure PwO are not discriminated against and are integrated into obesity care.
- Provide a sustained platform to enable best practice sharing and solutions for effective obesity management and prevention and to drive meaningful action and change for PwO.

The meeting was hosted in collaboration between the Embassy of Denmark and the Singapore Association for the Study of Obesity (SASO), with support from Novo Nordisk.



H.E. Sandra Jensen Landi
Ambassador of Denmark to
Singapore and Brunei
HOST



Dr Tham Kwang Wei
President of SASO
CHAIR

Participants engaged in two interactive workshop sessions to assess current obesity prevention and management strategies in Singapore and discuss additional solutions to support PwO. It was agreed that driving meaningful change is a multi-stakeholder responsibility. Policy change for obesity requires incremental shifts in existing structures and behaviours, including destigmatisation of obesity as a personal responsibility, as well as a mindset change from everyone that obesity is a multifactorial chronic disease, in particular from health policymakers, healthcare professionals (HCPs), employers and PwO.

Please refer to the [workshop key discussion themes and recommendations](#) section for more detailed information.



Figure 1: Suggested steps by participants to meaningful and sustained fundamental policy changes for obesity prevention and management in Singapore

The Obesity Landscape in Singapore

The prevalence of obesity is increasing at an alarming rate



Adults:
5.1% in 1992
10.5% in 2020¹



Children & adolescents
11% in 2013²
16% in 2021³

The prevalence for adults remains an underestimation, as it reflects the World Health Organization (WHO) international body mass index (BMI) cut-off point of $\geq 30 \text{ kg/m}^2$ used to define obesity. When the cut-off points recommended for Asian populations are applied, at 25 or 27.5 kg/m^2 , the actual prevalence in Singapore are even higher.

Global urgency to prevent the rise in obesity rates

During the 75th World Health Assembly in May 2022, delegates approved a record number of recommendations on non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including actions required by governments, whole-of-society and the WHO Secretariat to prevent and manage obesity over the life-course^{4,5}. To complement efforts to implement the recommendations by Member States at a country-level, an Acceleration Plan was developed, which focuses on a data-driven incremental strategy and multi-sectorial collaboration⁶.

In particular, the approved recommendations include:

- Recognising obesity as a complex multifactorial disease
- Acknowledging the stigma and bias experienced by people living with obesity in different geographies and cultures
- Addressing the need to prevent and manage obesity throughout the life-course
- Improving the training of healthcare providers (HCPs) in obesity management
- Makes recommendations for obesity to be included in universal health coverage (UHC) packages, and managed through multidisciplinary teams
- Highlighting the importance of regulating food environments through taxation and incentive

The focus in Singapore has been on other chronic diseases. For example, the “War on Diabetes” was initiated in 2016 to rally a whole-of-nation effort to tackle diabetes and its risk factors, including obesity. Therefore, measures to prevent and manage obesity are instituted with diabetes as the core focus.

Examples of initiatives to tackle obesity over the years include providing healthier food options in schools and outside of homes, developing health applications to reward healthy living and a nationwide steps challenge, National Steps Challenge, to promote an active lifestyle.

In addition, the government is at the forefront of developing applications, including Healthy 365 and LumiHealth, a public-private partnership with Apple, to incentivise and nudge residents towards healthy behaviours.

While obesity is not a new global health challenge, many barriers still exist for its effective prevention and management, as existing policies do not fully support a holistic, equitable and person-centred approach to address the multifactorial aspect of the disease. For example, lack of proper understanding of obesity results in misconceptions and widespread stigma within society and in healthcare settings, with consequential suboptimal clinical management of obesity.

Obesity is a chronic, multi-faceted disease

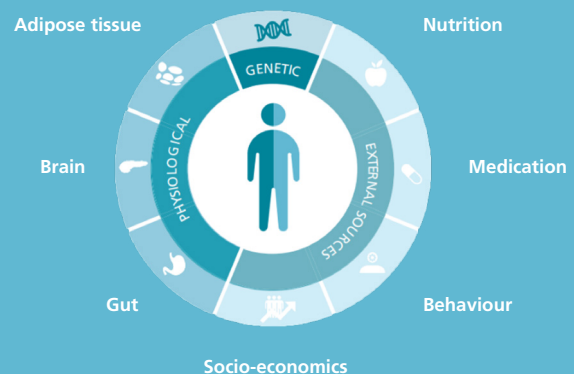


Figure 2: The multiple factors influencing a person's metabolic balance throughout their life, which requires a multidisciplinary approach to its management

In 2013, in response to the 2011 United Nations High Level Political Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs), the WHO set out a target to halt the rise of obesity at 2010 levels by 2025⁷. As of 2020, Singapore has maintained

obesity rates at 2010 levels but aggressive measures targeting the multiple drivers of obesity are needed to sustain and gradually decrease these rates, particularly in light of increasing childhood obesity prevalence and an ageing population.

The OPEN SG Inaugural Meeting



H.E. Sandra Jensen Landi
Ambassador of Denmark to
Singapore and Brunei
HOST



Dr Tham Kwang Wei
President of the Singapore
Association for the Study of Obesity
(SASO)
CHAIR



Dr Chow Wai Leng
Director (Epidemiology & Disease
Control), Ministry of Health,
Singapore
SPEAKER - Public health strategy in tackling
obesity: The current landscape and looking
ahead



Prof. Eric Finkelstein
Professor of Health Services and
Systems Research, Duke-NUS Medical
School, Singapore
SPEAKER - Economic impact of obesity⁸



Mr Praveen Raj Kumar
Deputy Director, Group Integrated
Care, National Healthcare Group
Singapore
SPEAKER - Community-based strategies within
the healthcare clusters



Dr Pernille Andreassen
Senior Researcher, The Danish
National Center for Obesity
SPEAKER - Set up of research and advocacy
centre in Denmark



Ms Wong Mei Lan
Person with obesity
SPEAKER - Living with obesity: Sharing a
personal journey



Participation from more than 40
stakeholders
Across public health, policy, clinical and
research in obesity and related fields

Across two workshop sessions, participants discussed the learnings from current initiatives and opportunities to develop additional strategies that improves care for PwO. The results of these discussions and subsequent recommendations are detailed in the next section.

During the meeting, the Host and Chair opened with presentations on the state of obesity and their hopes for the future of obesity management in Singapore, followed by presentations from various speakers on the local landscape of obesity policies and public health interventions, a recent study on the health economic impact of obesity in Singapore, as well as best practice sharing from the first National Obesity Knowledge Centre in Denmark.

Key Discussion Themes and Recommendations from Workshop Sessions

Challenges and Barriers to Effective Obesity Prevention and Management

Lack of awareness and knowledge that obesity is a complex and multifactorial chronic disease

This lack of awareness translates into a widespread misconception that obesity should not be clinically managed and a stigma that obesity is the PwO's sole personal and familial responsibility to tackle the disease, without the support of the health system. PwO are usually unaware of the need to seek medical help and appropriate disease management strategies until they develop serious health complications, while healthcare professionals can lack the resources needed to support PwO. It is important for general practitioners in primary care to be aware of the multifactorial nature of obesity and to be able to guide PwO or at risk of obesity to seek the necessary treatment.

Negative discrimination towards PwO affects all aspects of an individual's life, including relationships, employment, education. For example, gyms in Singapore are often not equipped to support people of different sizes. PwO are also often portrayed as unmotivated and unhealthy or are told to "just eat less and exercise more". This can lead to systemic issues, such as inflicting more bias against PwO, deterring PwO from seeking the necessary medical care and healthcare professionals being less likely to manage obesity.

Lack of interventions to address the drivers of obesity beyond healthy diet and physical exercise

Most current obesity interventions in Singapore focus predominantly on lifestyle interventions. While interventions that rely on the conscious choices of individuals such as healthy food choices and physical activity are important, addressing why and how people make these choices and tackling changes to the environment and societal norms that perpetuate rising obesity rates are also needed. This includes ensuring a healthy work-life balance and controlling environmental food cues.

Even after dietary and physical activity interventions

have been successful in managing obesity, adaptive hormonal changes and energy regulation which result in increased food intake and reduced energy expenditure may persist for years, which result in the maintenance of weight loss difficult to achieve. Therefore, a systemic, sustained approach, delivered at a large scale, is needed to address the complex nature and physiology of obesity, from prevention to long-term management of obesity.

Through addressing the complexity of obesity, other national health goals can also be achieved due to the common underlying drivers and etiologies of obesity and other chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and certain cancers. In particular, adopting healthy lifestyles throughout the life-course can reduce the risks related to obesity-related complications and these chronic diseases.

Prioritisation of Obesity Prevention and Management

While the ultimate goal of OPEN SG is to effect sustained and meaningful change via policy changes, two other key factors are essential and can significantly influence national health agendas. These include greater community-led support and mindset shift among PwO and HCPs.

Develop community-led initiatives to support sustained mindset and behaviour change that obesity is not a lifestyle disease

In societies such as Singapore, where family and community is integral to society, interventions involving the community can bring a personal touch necessary to effecting change in obesity management. This includes education on healthy food preparation for hawkers and creating new employment opportunities as ambassadors to guide PwO in accessing the right services.

Tackling obesity in Singapore can take learnings from the "War on Diabetes" campaign, which utilised a whole-of-society approach. For example, the government convened a Citizens' Jury, a group of 76

individuals of different expertise who actively proposed community-based proposals⁹. Such ground-up approaches ensure that the solutions are tailored to communities. In addition, the government launched community-based programmes, such as classes near residential parks island-wide to encourage physical activity.

With a community-based approach to addressing obesity, the view that it should be solely addressed individually can be destigmatised, which can subsequently encourage more people to seek the needed support.

Raise awareness that obesity requires holistic management strategies to support and treat PwO

Singapore has established multi-disciplinary centres that offer comprehensive and personalised obesity management programmes in all its restructured hospitals. Using evidence-based approaches, these centres are staffed by multi-disciplinary teams comprising bariatric physicians and surgeons, nurses, physiotherapists, dietitians and psychologists to guide PwO through their management journey.

However, cost and accessibility can be a barrier, as these programmes are not subsidised or largely publicised outside of the hospital setting. Bringing these centres or practices down to the community level and raising awareness of the existence of these services can help more people utilise these services at an affordable price.

Recognise obesity as a complex, chronic condition at the national level

The inclusion of obesity within the Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP) can allow for the use of MediSave, a national medical savings scheme. This can potentially ease the financial burden of medical costs for PwO and facilitate compliance with medical treatment. This subsequently encourages HCPs to address obesity as a chronic condition directly, instead of treating and managing other co-morbidities that have obesity as the root cause.

Existing clinical practice guidelines should be updated, so HCPs have a consistent approach during consultations, especially at a primary care level.

Challenges:



Lack of awareness and knowledge that obesity is a complex and multifactorial chronic disease



Lack of interventions to address the drivers of obesity beyond healthy diet and physical exercise

Solutions:



Figure 3: Summary of challenges and focus areas from the workshop discussions

Next Steps

Moving forward, the suggested focus areas of OPEN SG and the tangible steps to achieve them are as follows:

Supporting focus area: Develop community-led initiatives to support sustained mindset and behaviour change that obesity is not a lifestyle disease

- **Challenge:** Lack of interventions to address the drivers of obesity beyond healthy diet and physical exercise
- **Goal:** Obesity is seen as a multi-faceted disease that requires support from various stakeholders
- **Next steps and proposed way forward:** Integrate the patient voice across the healthcare journey to better understand the complexities of living with obesity and create solutions at the community level that address the multi-faceted nature of the disease

Supporting focus area: Raise awareness that obesity requires holistic management strategies beyond an individual's responsibility

- **Challenge:** Lack of awareness and knowledge that obesity is a complex and multifactorial chronic disease
- **Goal:** Normalising behaviour of seeking support early when faced with chronic weight-related issues
- **Next steps and proposed way forward:** Engagement at the community level to increase awareness of the

available support and strategies

Core focus area: Recognise obesity as a complex, chronic condition at the national level

- **Challenge:** Lack of awareness and knowledge that obesity is a complex and multifactorial chronic disease
- **Goal:** Formal recognition of obesity as a chronic disease on the national health agenda
- **Next steps and proposed way forward:** Creation of local engagement plans to engage relevant stakeholders in policy discussions to allocate the relevant reimbursement funds needed to support obesity management



Appendix: Additional Themes and Solutions Identified in Workshops

Key Themes



Do more in the prevention space

Solutions

- Ensure that the government is a key champion, with multistakeholder support
- Create easier access to healthier lifestyle in all settings, such as healthier options in school canteens
- Provide healthy lifestyle advice at community centres for easy access
- Engage with the Singapore Armed Force and Singapore Civil Defence Force to encourage males and females in National Service or civil defence services to stay physically active through talks and campaigns
- Build more weather-proof outdoor fitness venues
- Engage more hawker centres and restaurants to provide healthier plate options
- Provide explicit yet simple labelling on food, so individuals can make informed choices



Create holistic solutions that address the multi-faceted nature of obesity

- Create more holistic, interdisciplinary obesity centres in the community setting
- Upskill primary care providers, especially GPs in identifying challenges with weight, as well as advising and guiding patients to seek specialist care
 - Ensuring that specialist referrals from primary care are followed through
- Design localised clinical trials to evaluate merit of certain solutions at a local level
- Look beyond diet and exercise counselling to provide counselling in managing obesity as chronic condition



Raise awareness and education of obesity among a broader audience

- Raise awareness among PwOs on the existing services and solutions
- Establish a central resource sharing platform through a medical society
- Address the stigma and misconception of obesity as a purely cosmetic condition and consequently, an individual's responsibility
- Scale up awareness activities to involve various stakeholders across various settings, including in workplaces

Key Themes



Tap into diverse expertise and partnerships to address obesity

Solutions

- Leverage expertise from outside the industry, for example, with technology start-ups, to create digital initiatives to nudge behaviour change
- Increase resources in the obesity management space by upskilling people who are looking for a career switch or retirees. These resources can ensure last-mile delivery of obesity management, such as being a point-of-call for after-hours consultation on obesity management approaches, in order to increase uptake of such services amongst PwOs with full-time jobs
- Partner with local platforms such as Shopee or Grab to encourage the public to make healthier lifestyle choices for e.g., introducing an incentive system for individuals who purchase healthier choice items from GrabMart or book a ride to the gym
- Conduct regular best-practice sharing between various stakeholders involved in the prevention and management of obesity



Evolve policy and reimbursement structures

- Evolve reimbursement framework to ensure subsidies are available for patients who want to access treatment solutions to manage obesity
- Update clinical practice guidelines on preventing and managing obesity so that HCPs can have a consistent approach during consultations and when prescribing treatment
 - Provide recommendations on ways the clinical practice guidelines can be translated into actionable solutions
- Improve training and education among healthcare students and professionals around the prevention and treatment of obesity
- Reframe obesity prevention and management in a more positive light for e.g., moving away from “weight loss” to “healthy living”

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