



Perspectivas

Fat phobia in Mexican nutrition students

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Abstract

Nutritionists play a major role in the prevention and treatment of obesity. Currently, fat phobia among nutrition students and health workers is resulting in health and social consequences. The aim of this study was to assess the fat phobia among nutrition college students of two schools from different regions in México. Six hundred and thirty 18 to 25 yo nutrition students participated in the study. Fat phobia was assessed using the F-scale, containing 14 pairs of adjectives that described people with obesity. Participants achieved a mean F-scale score of 3.45, which could be considered a moderate amount of fat phobia. Only twelve per cent showed neutral or positive attitudes towards obesity (≤ 2.5), while negative attitude (≥ 2.5) was observed among 88% of all students showing a high prevalence of fat phobia towards obesity.

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Key words: *Fat phobia. Nutrition students. Obesity. México.*

Nutritionists play a major role in the prevention and treatment of obesity. Despite the high prevalence of obesity and abdominal obesity in México, a recent study among medical and psychology students reported a high frequency of fat phobia¹. Some experts, in another study have said, that “Anti-fat sentiment is increasing², is prevalent in health professionals, and has health and social consequences”. Puhl *et al.*³, investigated the attitude, among a convenience sample of 182 dietetics’ students from 14 schools, toward obese

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FOBIA HACIA LA OBESIDAD EN ESTUDIANTES MEXICANOS DE NUTRICIÓN

Resumen

Los nutricionistas juegan un papel importante en la prevención y el tratamiento de la obesidad, y la fobia hacia personas con obesidad entre estudiantes de nutrición y los trabajadores de la salud tiene consecuencias sanitarias y sociales. El propósito del estudio fue valorar la fobia hacia la obesidad, entre estudiantes de nutrición de dos escuelas de diferentes regiones de México. Seiscientos treinta estudiantes de 18 a 25 años participaron en el estudio. La fobia hacia la obesidad se evaluó mediante la escala F, que contiene 14 pares de adjetivos que describen a las personas con obesidad. Los participantes obtuvieron una media de calificación en la escala F de 3,45, lo que se considera una cantidad moderada de fobia hacia la obesidad. Solamente el 12% presentaron actitudes neutrales positivas ($\leq 2,5$), mientras que el 88% de los estudiantes presentaron actitudes negativas ($\geq 2,5$). Se observó una alta prevalencia de fobia hacia la obesidad.

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individuals in the USA. Using the Fat Phobia Scale, they found a moderate amount of fat phobia (3.7). Using the same scale, in México, among 528 first to fifth year psychology and medical students, a moderate amount of fat phobia (3.4) was also found¹. Additionally, fifth year medical students were more likely to have fat phobia than first year students, suggesting that the medical school environment increases negative attitude toward the obese person. Also students with normal waist circumference were found more likely to have fat phobia compared to students with abdominal obesity⁴. We have not found studies in México exploring an anti-fat attitude toward obese persons among nutrition students. The aim of this study was to assess fat phobia among nutrition college students from two Mexican schools in different regions.

Methods: Seven hundred and forty four enrolled students in all grades from Reynosa, Tamaulipas and

Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico were invited to participate. Eighty three percent nutrition (634) students 18 to 25 yo participated in the study.

Weight, height and waist circumference were assessed among first to four grade students. Fat phobia was assessed using the F-scale, which contains 14 pairs of adjectives that describe people with obesity. Participants responded, on a scale of 1 to 5, which one was the best adjective that described their beliefs about people with obesity. Responses were then scored according to the criteria established by Bacon *et al.*⁵.

Results: Thirty per cent of the students were overweight or obese and 24% had abdominal obesity. Participants achieved a mean F-scale score of 3.45 ± 0.69 , which might be considered a moderate amount of fat phobia. Only 12% showed neutral or positive attitude towards obesity (≤ 2.5), while negative attitude (≥ 2.5) had 88% of all students. There was no observed difference between school grades, weight status, and contact with people having excess weight.

These results highlight the importance of intervention strategies in the curriculum of the nutrition students to prevent this bias having health and social implications. Additionally, Matharu *et al.*⁶, conducted a randomized controlled trial among 129 medical students from three universities, and found that students enrolled at the play-reading group had significantly decreased explicit fat bias at follow-up. However, the intervention did not have any effect on implicit bias. Likewise, Kushner *et al.*⁷, conducted an intervention study among 127 first year medical students where students discuss a standardized overweight patients. Prior to the session, students read two articles on stigma. Their reflections on the readings and the performance with the standardized patients were conducted before and after students met in small groups. An assessment about attitude toward the obese person was on a priori classification of item intent. More than half of the students improve scales scores immediately and at one year of follow-up, on negative obesity stereotyping, empathy and counse-

ling confidence⁷. The results of these studies are promising for decreasing negative attitudes, increasing empathy and raising confidence toward persons who are obese.

Since Latin-American countries have high prevalence of obesity both in adult and children population⁸, intervention studies are warranted for Latin-American, health care students, to reduce a wrongful attitude with negative implications for the obese person, their family and the society.

Conclusions: High prevalence of fat phobia towards obesity was observed. These results are incongruous with the evidence of the multifactorial causes of obesity and the implications of stigmatizations toward people with obesity. Required intervention studies to assess the prevention of developing anti-fat attitudes among health care students is highly recommended.

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