

# STIGMA

## THE PATIENT PERSPECTIVE BY BERNADETTE KEENAN- ICPO

On 27th of August, Dr Flint was invited to speak at the 2020 second annual Obesity Summer school hosted by the HSE's Obesity Management Clinical Programme. 'Weight Stigma and discrimination; implications for healthcare' being the title of the talk.

A regularly utilised, reoccurring word was 'pervasive' which unfortunately describes this form of Stigma so well. It consistently invades our everyday lives be it the preconceived stereotyping we face. Laziness, slothfulness & gluttony were 3 mentioned more obvious stereotypes, lack of intelligence, being chosen as an intimate partner and friend were also suggested which usually are not discussed to the same degree as the first 3, yet may have a more profound effect upon someone's life than the more obvious points. Possibly as these are far more personal. It raises the topic of how difficult it may be for a person with Overweight & Obesity to feel comfortable enough to have

that conversation with family, friends and HCPs in the belief that they will be misunderstood.

If a patient attempts to discuss the physical, emotional and environmental factors or a combina-

tion of all three which may lead to weight gain, it is often viewed as 'a series of excuses' even by those the patient believes should understand. The above combination of factors does not negate personal responsibility yet, those seeking appropriate help from HCPs who do understand

metabolic disorders, find themselves stigmatised once more. They are informed they are a burden to society if they choose either chemical or surgical help as our society still rejects the belief long term outcomes depend upon more than just eating less and moving more.

According to Dr Flint, people experience stigma in settings such as Education, the Workplace, from Media sources, Exercise and PA settings, Healthcare, Policies & Campaigns which most have noted became heightened during the Covid Pandemic. Unfortunately, he has noted this is far from an exhaustive list.

Every patient has at least one story to recount regarding stigma in various settings, unfortunately, some have numerous to impart. Mine include being blamed for Miscarriages. being weighed on a scales in a hospital kitchen as regular scales in the hospital did not read weight over 25 stones. A disagreement with an Orthopaedic Surgeon due to lack of investigation of a severely painful knee given advice pointed to



automatic knee analysis post specific leg break which had been diagnosed. Making it to the last 2 in a job interview and a person informing me subsequently (on the side) that I failed because they assumed, I would be absent more often than the other interviewee due to my weight. Being informed by a hospital that they would not be able to perform a cholecystectomy as they did not possess equipment to deal with my 'size'.

There are so many more & worse, from friends, relatives etc including simple assumptions re my food choices and movement. Some from a misguided sense of 'trying to help' and others with a superior air as though my weight reduced my brain capacity. Each episode has left a scar on my psyche, being overly sensitive certainly does not help. We must remember to challenge reactions and educate those willing to learn as hopefully they may educate others. Most importantly, we must remain positive that our questioning of stigma will gradually make society rethink and question language, imagery & preconceived ideas which we face daily. Also, we must be thankful to and for those HCPs who have made it their lives' work to investigate, understand and provide treatments for those of us living with obesity, some of whom may have had to overcome their own stigmatising ideas be it consciously or sub-consciously.

"When I finally got the courage to talk to my GP about my weight, he was so supportive. In fact he was the one referred me to the Weight Management Service"-

MF White, ICPO

"I would like people living with obesity to feel confident that healthcare professionals do not perpetuate weight stigma in healthcare and other settings and that a pathway to good physical and psychological health is open to all our patients. Joint efforts are needed to highlight how damaging ridicule and shame are to the well being of people living with obesity."



-Dr. Sarah Browne,  
Registered Dietitian and Lec-