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Exploring Attitudes about Weight and Weight Stigma Among Undergraduate Health Science Students

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Weight stigma is commonly described as the rejection, discrimination, or devaluation of those who do not fit societal norms of body weight and shape. Weight stigma is frequently experienced by patients in the healthcare setting, but it is uncertain where and when healthcare providers develop the weight bias that leads to stigmatizing patients. **PURPOSE:** To measure the prevalence of weight bias among undergraduate health profession students and examine if and how a lesson on weight bias and stigma influenced the magnitude of weight bias over time.

METHODS: In the first week of a senior capstone course focused on social issues in healthcare, students were invited to complete an anonymous survey that assessed their attitudes about weight and weight stigma. In week 3, students were asked to read an article and listen to two podcasts about weight stigma prior to an in-class lesson. Students were asked to repeat the survey eight weeks later. The Attitudes Towards Obese Persons Scale (ATOP) and Modified Weight Bias Internalization Scale (WBIS) were used to measure weight stigma and internalized weight bias, respectively. Higher Scores on the WBIS and lower scores on the ATOP denote more negative attitudes towards fatness. Pre- and post-intervention scores were compared using a paired samples t-test (ATOP) and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (WBIS). The relationship between body mass index (BMI) and ATOP changes scores was assessed using Spearman's ρ . **RESULTS:** 18 students (13 females, 5 males; body mass index = 25.3 ± 4.9) completed the initial survey and 11 students completed the post-intervention survey. There were no significant differences in ATOP ($p = 0.70$) or WBIS total scores ($p = 0.80$) compared to baseline scores. Participants with higher BMI tended to have higher score changes (Spearman's $\rho = 0.44$), which indicates less bias towards overweight or obese individuals' post-intervention, although this relationship was not statistically significant ($p = 0.17$). **CONCLUSION:** Understanding how weight bias develops among future healthcare providers is critical. In this preliminary study, weight bias was prevalent among senior health professions students. There was a tendency towards more positive post-intervention ATOP scores, but only in individuals with a higher BMI. Longer interventions with larger sample sizes may be necessary.