Department of Surgery
Section of Minimally Invasive Surgery

The Growing Knowledge Gap in the Treatment and Management of Obesity in Medical Training

Eileen R Smith, MD; Bradley S Kushner, MD; Michael M Awad, MD, PhD; Shaina R Eckhouse, MD

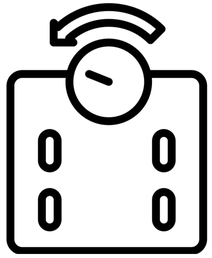
Washington University in St. Louis
School of Medicine

INTRODUCTION: The disease of obesity is a major public health issue in the US. However, obesity is often viewed as a risk factor rather than a multifaceted disease. Given the prevalence of obesity, all physicians regardless of specialty should have a comprehensive understanding of obesity and the treatment of obesity, including both medical and surgical care. We hypothesized that current curriculum does not supply medical students with the knowledge and confidence to deliver comprehensive obesity treatment to this growing population

METHODS: To characterize this gap between actual and ideal knowledge of obesity treatment, we compared medical students to current surgical residents, whose experience with bariatric surgery patients gives them a broader understanding of obesity care. We designed surveys to assess knowledge, understanding, and attitudes around the disease of obesity and associated therapies, including surgery, with input from both an bariatric surgeon as well as an expert surgical educator. Participation was voluntary. All general surgery residents and core surgical clerkship medical students at our institution were invited to participate.

When compared to surgical residents, medical students

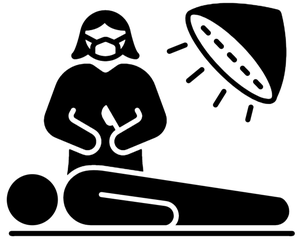
were less likely to view bariatric surgery as a safe and effective therapy





were less comfortable discussing weight with patients

were less likely to refer patients with obesity for surgical therapy



RESULTS: In total, 46 medical students and 36 general surgery residents at our institution completed the surveys. Medical students perceived bariatric surgery as both less safe and less effective than did general surgery residents ($p<0.01$ and $p=0.03$, respectively). Medical students additionally reported significantly less confidence discussing surgical treatment of obesity, the impact of bariatric surgery on medications, and even discussing weight with patients ($p<0.01$, $p<0.01$, and $p<0.01$). Medical students were less likely than surgical residents to refer a patient with obesity for surgical therapy even if they met the appropriate criteria ($p=0.03$).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS: Our results suggest medical students are entering the physician workforce lacking critical knowledge of obesity as a disease and a thorough understanding of available treatment options. Further work will utilize this needs assessment to drive curricular changes aimed at increasing student knowledge and enhancing skills to deliver comprehensive care to patients with obesity.

Icons obtained through www.thenounproject.com. Scale by Berkah Icon. Surgeon by Iconathon US, and Hospital by Adrien Coquet.