

# MEDIA GUIDELINES:

Avoiding Weight  
Stigma & Discrimination



Weight stigma is reported by people of all ages and backgrounds in the UK, and across the world.<sup>1-2</sup> The media has an important role in public awareness, understanding and the formation and maintenance of attitudes and behaviours within society. Thus, this influential capacity can play a critical role in the equality of people irrespective of body weight.

There is evidence that UK media framing of obesity is stigmatising.<sup>3-6</sup> This research has reported that people with obesity are stigmatised and dehumanised in news coverage and discussion of emergent topics offered by media sources to engage and educate readers. This includes reporting on weight loss interventions, which are framed in a stigmatising manner, as this can reduce recruitment and effectiveness of individual weight management attempts, services and other forms of healthcare treatment. Thus, avoiding stigmatising media portrayal of obesity is warranted and has the potential to contribute to the reduction of weight stigmatisation, and weight based discrimination in many settings including schools,<sup>7-8</sup> workplaces,<sup>9-10</sup> exercise

environment<sup>11-12</sup> and in healthcare.<sup>13-14</sup> Whilst evidence informs that media portrayal of obesity is stigmatising, derogatory and discriminatory, due to the influence and role of the media, improving portrayal is perceived to be critical in reducing weight stigma and discrimination in society today. By working together, the media and other sources can support and contribute to reducing weight stigma and discrimination, and support public health efforts on a number of different levels (e.g., individual, societal, national). Indeed, improving public understanding and beliefs about causes of obesity that are outside of an individual's control (e.g. genetics, environmental factors) can lead to greater support of public health policy and campaigns.<sup>15</sup>



## PURPOSE

The aim of these guidelines is to support non-stigmatising media portrayal of people of all body weights, and to support the media to produce accurate reports on body weight related topics that avoids derogatory coverage. By using these guidelines, the media can avoid stigmatising and discriminatory media portrayal.

The guidelines are particularly relevant for traditional media, i.e., newspaper outlets, television, film, and radio. They can also be used to improve social media, advertisement and marketing. These guidelines have been produced based on research evidence, taking professional journalist society codes of conduct into consideration (e.g., National Union of Journalists, Society of Professional Journalists).<sup>16-17</sup>

1. If the focus of a news report is not about body weight, avoid mentioning or including information about weight or obesity.
2. Avoid using humour or ridicule when reporting on body weight. This includes when reporting on news stories and media outlet discussions of emergent topics.
3. Avoid suggestions that a person's body weight implies negative assumptions about their character, intelligence, abilities, etc.
4. Avoid stereotyping people based on body weight (e.g., laziness, gluttony, lacking intelligence).
5. Provide accurate, evidence-based information, and avoid distorted portrayal or overemphasis of body weight.
6. Avoid inappropriate language or terminology when reporting on body weight or using terms such as 'obesity' or 'overweight' as adjectives. Use first person language (i.e., put people before a characteristic of disability). For instance, rather than using "obese people like to...", use people first language "people with obesity like to...".
7. Use scientific descriptive terms when referring to weight, i.e. using Body Mass Index descriptors.
8. Use non-stigmatising images, photographs or video clips when reporting on body weight. For a list of non-stigmatising image banks, please see the resources below.
9. Where possible, take opportunities to promote weight equality when reporting on weight.
10. Recognise that people have different views and opinions: avoid implying that all people with overweight and obesity have a desire to lose weight. Recognise that there is an array of weight loss methods that people might choose, and where weight loss is desired, that no one method or form of treatment is appropriate for all.
11. Avoid combative language when referring to efforts to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity. For instance, 'the war on obesity' and 'fight against obesity'.
12. Where appropriate, take the opportunity to condemn weight stigma attitudes and discriminatory behaviour.
13. Recognise the complexity of obesity: there are over 100 factors contribute to the cause obesity,<sup>18</sup> many of which are outside of a person's control. Where appropriate, portrayal should recognise the array of causes, both controllable and uncontrollable.
14. Avoid implicitly or explicitly blaming individuals, families and groups, or implying that a particular population group does not wish to manage their weight.



## SUMMARY

Weight stigma is multi-faceted and pervasive, and it is imperative that sources within society, which influence attitudes and behaviours, understand their role and contribute to avoiding the incitement of stigma and discrimination. It is envisaged that media sources will adhere to these guidelines for reporting on weight and in doing so, contribute to efforts to reduce weight stigma and discrimination.



Where media sources are unsure on how to use the guidelines, they are encouraged to contact **Dr Stuart W. Flint**, Senior Research Fellow in Public Health and Obesity at Leeds Beckett University ([S.W.Flint@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:S.W.Flint@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)), who has produced these guidelines, for support.

### FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

#### Non-stigmatising imagery

1. World Obesity Federation:  
<http://www.imagebank.worldobesity.org/>
2. Canadian Obesity Network:  
<http://www.obesitynetwork.ca/images-bank>
3. University of Connecticut's Rudd Center:  
<http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/media-gallery>
4. Obesity Action Coalition: <https://www.obesityaction.org/get-educated/public-resources/oac-image-gallery/>
5. European Association for the Study of Obesity:  
<http://easo.org/media-portal/obesity-image-bank/>
6. IFB Adiposity Diseases centre:  
<http://www.ifb-adipositas.de/en/news-press/photos>

#### General information on weight stigma

University of Connecticut's Rudd Center:  
<http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/weight-bias-stigma>  
[http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/Rudd\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Weight\\_Bias.pdf](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/Rudd_Policy_Brief_Weight_Bias.pdf)

#### World Health Organisation EU Region:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity/publications/2017/weight-bias-and-obesity-stigma-considerations-for-the-who-european-region-2017>

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- <sup>16</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. Code of ethics. <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> [Last accessed 01 October 2018].
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