

How Can Health Care Providers Be Part of the Solution?

Submitted by:

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Health professionals who care for children and adolescents must integrate the prevention and treatment of obesity and obesity-related conditions into their practices. In addition, they must become advocates to improve the overall environment that now promotes obesity in youth. To turn the tide on this epidemic, health care providers will have to overcome the barriers that impede their full participation in combating childhood obesity.

The first thing that must be done is to give pediatricians and other physicians caring for children algorithms on how to assess and utilize age and gender specific BMI categories. Early assessment needs to be linked to comprehensive diagnostic and treatment guidelines. These approaches indicate when weight maintenance, rather than weight loss is indicated. This will help overcome a barrier that pediatricians believe weight loss is very difficult to near impossible to achieve.

Physicians often feel ill-equipped and ineffective because they have not received nutrition or behavioral counseling training. Through seminars and courses sponsored by a host of professional organizations, they can be shown how to integrate basic nutrition information, readiness to change assessment, motivational interviewing and behavior modification within the context of their practices. These techniques will help physicians successfully provide counseling on variety of life-style issues enhancing the overall effectiveness of their practices.

Primary care physicians often do not have access to a team that includes nutritionists, exercise physiologists and psychologists. To address the enormity of the problem, new teams can be made of non-traditional partners such as nurses, teachers, schools, after-school programs, coaches, clubs, organizations and other community resources, as well as parents and grandparents. Providers can be given tools that will allow them to access these community resources during the health care encounter.

Another reason why physicians are uncomfortable is they are unclear as how to proceed, what to advise and exactly how to counsel. There are no evidence-based guidelines on how to use the pediatric primary care setting for obesity prevention. However, there are controlled trials of pediatric obesity prevention in schools and in the community. Lessons learned from these trials need to be applied now while on-going research continues as how to best address this problem in the physicians' office. Focus should be placed on the strong culture of prevention in the pediatric community, with immunization, nutrition, safety and screening for developmental delays being the fundamental core of pediatrics. To that list, obesity prevention must now be added.

Evidenced-based and practical age and gender specific screening guidelines of obesity-related risk factors and diseases appropriate for growing children and peri-pubertal youth need to be developed and promulgated widely. In addition, guidelines are needed for conditions previously limited to adults such as insulin resistance, hypertension, dyslipidemia, sleep apnea, orthopedic, hepatic and psychosocial complications. This situation requires a critical shift in the process of providing care to children. Key issues include: what is the best way for the primary care provider to interact with sub-specialists, how can the pediatrician or primary care physician maintain the medical home for the patient and how does pediatrics better integrate the chronic care model.

Finally, physicians are posed to advocate for the environmental and political changes that will be necessary for effective prevention of childhood obesity. Historically, the pediatric community has led many efforts that have changed health policies. That community, in collaboration with parents and other partners, can now play a similar role in advocating for the societal changes needed to overcome the pediatric obesity epidemic. Since the epidemic is caused by many factors- from genetics, to individual behaviors to the environments in which we all live, work, learn and play- the solutions will need to come from a range of sectors. Using holistic and ecological approaches, health care providers can proudly be part of the solution to a potentially devastating problem.