Reviewer's report

Title: Attitudes towards and Perception of Overweight and Obesity in the Public Opinion: a systematic review

Version: 1 Date: 7 June 2011

Reviewer: anna odone

Reviewer's report:

The present review is quite interesting and original and adds something to the knowledge on the issue of stigma towards overweight and obesity and their perceived causes in the general population. There are however several problems in the definition of the study's objective and the presentation of the results.

Authors should address the following major and minor points:

Major points

1. The idea of studying the prevalence of stigma towards overweight and obesity is interesting. However, authors should clarify on the objectives of their review; authors claim that stigma towards overweight and obesity might have a great impact on public health actions aimed at contrasting increasing obesity rates but did not give sufficient elements to support this statement. Authors should try to give reasons why “Further research on public attitudes toward and perception of overweight and obesity is urgently needed to depict the prevailing degree of stigmatization”. The paper would be strengthened by explaining which are the possible negative consequences of stigmatization towards obesity and overweight. In addition, authors should provide relevant references when supporting these concepts.

2. Authors analyzed how opinion on perceived causes of obesity vary across different 'socio-demographic determinants' but did not give in the 'discussion' section any possible interpretation of these findings nor explanation on the possible implications of such findings on public health actions.

3. Authors should clarify on how many studies were included in the review. The 'abstract' and the 'study characteristics'' sections mention 6 studies while 7 studies appear in Table 1.

4. The quality of written English is good. However the structure of the text is quite heavy all along the document and many passages are unclear to the reader. Authors should revise the text, pointing out important messages, simplify the structure of the text and avoid complicated and unclear-in meaning sentences. (see minor points for details)

Minor points

Title:
1. The title does not clearly represent the objectives of the review. Authors should modify the title (i.e. introducing the idea of stigma towards overweight).

Abstract:

2. “One major cause of negative consequences regarding individual (eating behavior, psychiatric comorbidity) and public health (prevention efforts etc.) dimensions is the perceived stigmatization and discrimination by their social surroundings.” What does “their” refer to? Please clarify and consider rephrasing.

3. “For all three components, results on sociodemographic…” What does “Three” refer to? Are you referring to attitudes, casual beliefs and prevention support? Please clarify and consider rephrasing.

4. I would not include the paragraph on “theoretical models” in the abstract and just mention this part in the full text.

Background:

5. As it is mentioned several times throughout the text, it is important that authors explain the concept of “weight bias” in the ‘background’ section.

Methods:

6. Authors could have included Emabase among the electronic databases explored.

7. The search strategy could have included the term ‘obes*’ instead of the term ‘obesity*’ in order not to possibly exclude other relevant studies. In addition, also the term ‘over-weight’ should have been included in the search strategy coupled with the term ‘overweight’. Authors might include the suggested terms in a new search to check that no relevant studies had been excluded. Lastly, authors should not exclude reviews (i.e NOT review) in the search strategy as reviews’ reference lists could be a rich source of possibly relevant studies to include.

Results:

8. “Only one article reports explicit measures of stigmatizing attitudes. Hilbert et al. (2008) foundan average WCB score of 3.01 (scale range: 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree), indicating neither agreement nor disagreement overall”, this passage is not clear. Authors should consider rephrasing.

9. “Attribution of obesity to be a result of the food environment contributed to variance explanation the most. Higher age, female gender and residence in the eastern part of Germany were sociodemographic correlates of prevention support”. Why “residence in the eastern part of Germany” is not included in table 3?

10. “Furthermore, a greater perceived significance of obesity, stronger societal responsibility for a solution of the obesity problem and more casual attribution of obesity to lack of activity behavior were shown to be significant predictors”. What are authors referring to when saying “predictors”? are they referring to predictors of prevention support? Please clarify on this point.
Discussion:

11. “The authors propose that the obvious failure to comply with societal norms (and that being the goal of attractiveness and fitness), cast in terms of morality and character (e.g. lack of willpower) leads to “reintegrative shaming”, trying to increase conformity with norms” The meaning of this sentence results unclear, please consider rephrasing.

Limitations:

12. Authors should stress the fact that only one study dealt with stigma towards obesity and overweight, this being a limiting aspect of the review.

13. Authors should mention the fact of having considered only nationally representative studies as a strength of the review.

Conclusions:

14. “Such concept is proposed by Sharma & Padwal; making obesity a sign of underlying causes that lead to overeating and a positive energy intake balance. In their model, simple overeating and reduced activity behavior are not perceived as causes; the authors rather demand an analysis of underlying- mainly external- factors that lead to the overeating and less exercise”. The meaning of this sentence results unclear, please consider rephrasing.

Future Perspectives and Practical Implications:

15. Authors should try to give reasons why “Further research on public attitudes toward and perception of overweight and obesity is urgently needed to depict the prevailing degree of stigmatization”. The paper would be strengthened by explaining which are the possible negative consequences of stigmatization towards obesity and overweight. In addition, authors should provide relevant references when supporting these concepts.

Tables:

16. Table 1 is not clear (too much text) and could be improved

Moreover, authors should carefully revise the entire text for the presence of several typos.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a
statistician.