

Overweight or obese – you are not your condition

Stigmatising and discriminatory characterisations of people as «obese» or «overweight» should be avoided in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association.

There is general agreement that people should not be labelled by their condition or disease. This topic has been referred to in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association on numerous occasions (1, 2). Labels such as epileptic, diabetic, disabled or retarded should be avoided, because such characterisations may seem discriminatory, stigmatising or offensive.

Nevertheless, many of us, including the undersigned, use designations such as «overweight» and «obese», in popular-science as well as academic articles (3). Two searches made in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association on 5 May 2015 for «overweight» and «obese» respectively returned 308 and 116 hits, many of them from recent volumes.

I was therefore both happy and surprised when I read that the editors of the American journal *Obesity* had taken seriously a letter to the editor on «the need for people-first language» (4, 5). They resolutely replied that henceforth, they will do their best to avoid using words such as «obese» to refer to individuals. They will immediately change their guidelines, and the editors will systematically replace the adjective «obese» with the noun «obesity» in future articles.

A concrete example might be to replace «morbidly obese persons» with «persons with morbid obesity.» The undersigned will attempt to change his practice from this day forth. I challenge the editors of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association to follow the example set by their American colleagues.

Jøran Hjelmesæth

joran.hjelmeseth@niv.no

Morbid Obesity Centre
Vestfold Hospital Trust
and

Department of Endocrinology, Morbid Obesity
and Preventive Medicine
Division of Medicine
Institute of Clinical Medicine
University of Oslo



Venus of Willendorf – ideal of beauty dating from the Palaeolithic. Photo: NTB scanpix

Jøran Hjelmesæth (born 1957), professor, MD, PhD, specialist in internal medicine and renal diseases. He is head of the interdisciplinary outpatient clinic and the research group at the Morbid Obesity Centre.

References

1. Nakken KO. Betegnelsen epileptiker bør unngås. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2013; 133: 1088.
2. Nylund MF. Funksjonshemmet? Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2009; 129: 1491.

3. Hjelmesæth J. Randomiserte studier – nyttige for hvem? Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2014; 134: 1819.
4. Dietz WH. The need for people-first language in our obesity journal. Obesity (Silver Spring) 2015; 23: 917.
5. Ravussin E, Ryan D. Response to «the need for people-first language in our obesity journal». Obesity (Silver Spring) 2015; 23: 918.

Received 7 May 2015, accepted 11 June 2015.

Editor: Erlend Hem.