

American Medical Association: Obesity is a disease

Written by Victoria Pelham The Desert Sun
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Coachella Valley health professionals are optimistic that a recent American Medical Association recognition of obesity as a disease will help improve treatment for it, reduce its vast reach and end some stigma against overweight patients.

Though the ruling has no legal bearing, doctors said it places greater importance on the serious health crisis and could move fundraising dollars toward addressing and combating it. It could also help to increase care and coverage for these patients, eventually lowering the high rates of obesity contributing to poor health in the valley, they said.

“They’ll be able to have access to care better than they do now,” said Sandra Quattlebaum, director of bariatrics and diabetes at Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs.

In eastern Riverside County, 20.3 percent of the population, or approximately 99,740 people, are obese based on the common measuring tool of their Body Mass Index, according to 2010 data from the Health Assessment Resource Center. And 7.5 percent, or about 39,073 people, had been told that they had obesity as a medical condition.

“(Obesity) is a very large problem in the Coachella Valley,” said Glen Grayman, president of the board of the Desert Healthcare District and HARC. “The extent of the problem is not substantially improving. We have a long way to go here at home.”

Jeralyn Brossfield, medical director of wellness programs at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage and a diplomate of the American Board of Obesity Medicine, said that about one-third of her patients are obese.

She said this ruling could spur on several big steps in solving the problem. For instance, the decision could convince federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, to recognize obesity as a disease, which could lead to more insurance coverage and reimbursements for treatment of obese patients and funding of efforts targeting obesity.

It could also affect the core coverage offered by Covered California, the new state insurance exchanges set up under the Affordable Care Act, Brossfield said.

And it could lead to the creation of treatment teams focused on obese patients with a “similar coordination of care” as patients with heart disease, she said.

Brossfield added that the ruling could help to reduce the stigma against overweight people.

“Our society tends to stigmatize obesity as a problem of overeating or lack of willpower,” she said. “Most obese people have other factors that make their obesity really complex to treat.”

Education is a big part of the answer, she added, as is good medical care and community resources.

Pearl, 78, of Palm Desert and a member of Overeaters Anonymous who would not give her last name, said that she has felt discrimination against her because of her weight. A former designer, she became bulimic because “to be fat in my field was to not be employable.”

She eventually found help in Overeaters Anonymous, a free 12-step group similar to Alcoholics Anonymous that she said provides a more spiritual, successful and full approach to dealing with weight loss. The group will be holding a convention in Palm Springs next week.

She said it’s a good thing that the AMA has finally recognized obesity as a disease. She is hopeful the designation will improve insurance coverage, as well as how the “symptoms of obesity” are dealt with. She has suffered from cancer and arthritis partially as a result of her obesity, she said.

But most of all, Pearl said, the ruling will help many like her recognize that the condition is a sickness. They are neither bad nor crazy.

“The decision will help put it in its proper perspective in that it is a disease,” she said.

Other organizations in the Coachella Valley working to combat obesity include the Clinton Health Matters Initiative and its partner the Clinton Foundation-headed Alliance for a Healthier Generation working against childhood obesity.

Other local groups, such as the Desert Healthcare District and Hidden Harvest, also contribute efforts to nutritious eating.

But more can always be done, Quattlebaum said.

“We have room for growth,” she said.

Quattlebaum agreed that the decision could help to remove weight bias, improving treatment of obesity. The bariatric specialist clinic she works in, which offers a range of weight-control services including nutritional counseling and surgery, saw close to 150 patients in 2012 for surgery relating to obesity.

She echoed the potential for treating more obesity if more can be covered under insurance, saying that many people are missed in treatment because of that barrier.

Quattlebaum added that most of their patients come in with other medical problems relating to obesity, so reducing obesity levels would also help to reduce rates of several health conditions linked to it including high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiac and liver disease and some types of cancer.

The AMA ruling was somewhat controversial, as it overruled one of its own advisory committees to make the change. The committee had taken issue with the BMI calculation which many believe is a flawed tool. Coachella Valley health professionals said that, though it wasn’t perfect, it was the best modern indicator of obesity.

At the Desert Regional clinic, a BMI of 35 or greater with another related condition qualifies you for bariatric surgery. A BMI of 40 or greater without other conditions would qualify for surgery.

Grayman said that the jury was still out on what kind of impact the AMA decision would have, but he said there could be some benefits. He said the potential for research reimbursement “could make this a more well-understood disease.” Because of the classic disease-based approach to health care taught in medical schools, it could increase focus from physicians and health care professionals on reducing obesity, he said.

“Physicians are less inclined to deal in a very serious and profound way with something they consider a disorder or behavioral event,” he said.

Grayman said it could also lead to more people taking proactive steps toward treating their weight.

“Perhaps individuals recognizing they had a disease — rather than they’re just a little overweight — in their minds might change their perception and their willingness and ability to deal with that disease and to see health care professionals who can help them with it,” he said.