



ASO 2nd UKCO Congress held at the University of Glasgow 9th -11th September 2015.

Public engagement UKCO style!

As part of the 2nd UKCO congress ASO trustees took the opportunity to enhance the ASO's public engagement (PE). With guidance from the University of Glasgow's PE officer, Dr Jamie Gallagher, trustees planned a debate titled "Obesity: Weighing up the problem". This debate addressed such questions as should we treat obesity, if so should we apply surgical interventions across the board, or should interventions that both prevent weight gain and reduce weight be used more widely? Social media were used to promote the event, as well as using contacts with various local interested "lay" bodies such as Glasgow Skeptics and Café Scientifique. The debate was held in the Private Dining Room of Oran Mor with a capacity of close to 40. The debate ran in the evening from 6.30-7.30pm. It was an informal setting, with attendees encouraged to bring their drinks upstairs.

We were fortunate to secure Eleanor Bradford, health correspondent for BBC Scotland, to chair the debate. Given the cost of obesity treatments, Prof. Jennifer Beecham, London School of Economics & Political Science, provided us with a health economics insight, whilst Prof. Nick Finan, University College Hospital, London, spoke on obesity management with a surgical focus and Prof. Mike Lean, University of Glasgow spoke on lifestyle intervention. Professor Finan indicated that for some individuals meaningful weight loss can only be achieved with surgical intervention,, Considerable weight loss of >25kg can be achieved and is proven to reverse hypertension, hyperlipidaemia and raised blood glucose. Prof Finan felt it important to recognise the value of surgery used once individuals have failed at lifestyle intervention. Those in receipt of surgery invoke "savings" on their health care costs and as their needs will fall considerably. For some people, surgery is the only way forward for them. However, the idea that surgery should be used with caution was key to his argument. Professor Lean challenged the concept that surgical interventions are useful, arguing that they were very much a "limited treatment" only used when all else had failed, whose use should be very restricted. Lean challenged the idea that the use of lifestyle/dietary interventions offers little in terms of health benefits. He felt they were poorly implemented and not widely supported at the level of the health care practitioner. A more thorough use of advice to move more, become more active, and to adopt balanced eating, and avoid an overconsumption of calories, both in a medical setting and also in terms of prevention of weight gain by making public transport and infrastructure to reduce the need to use cars. Obesity prevention in the environment is another range of interventions that have yet to be devised.

Professor Beecham was very thought provoking, asking the audience to imagine being the person in the health board with the budget, the one who is responsible for allocating a limited pot of funding to many, many needy and important areas. This was really useful in guiding the thoughts of the audience in appreciating how hard funding allocations are to make. Given the short term nature of budgets and planning, she felt it was easier to apply short term fixes, rather than long term solutions

and consider which outcomes would each pound spent on prevention planning have compared to funding a surgical procedure.

Prior to the event starting attendees were encouraged to answer the following questions:

1. How much does obesity cost the NHS per year?
2. Should governments use policy to drive lifestyle change?
3. Should GPs be monitoring the weight of patients?
4. What is the single most important area in tackling obesity?
5. What percentage of adults over 24 years of age are considered overweight?

Going by the audience survey people were unsure of how much obesity costs the NHS with some (19%) thinking it as low as £40 million while others (10%) thought it a thousand times higher at £40 billion. Actual estimates, (to be used with caution, as they often include / exclude different cost elements) show that obesity is a greater burden on the UK's economy than armed violence, war and terrorism. Obesity costs the UK nearly £47 billion a year or 2.5% of gross domestic product.

The overwhelming majority of the audience (>80 %) though both that GPs should be monitoring patients' weight and that governments should be using policy to drive lifestyle change. There was a lot of uncertainty as to the level of obesity in the UK with close to 50 % believing less than one in every two adults were overweight while the actual figures for Scotland is 25% for obesity and 63% for overweight and obesity.

Before the debate over 90 % of the audience believed that lifestyle was the single most important area in tackling obesity and the debate did not change minds with only one person favouring surgery by the end of the debate.

