

Obesity in Australia and its Impact on the Nursing Practice

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Obesity is a condition in which excess body fat accumulates in the body to the extent of having negative effects on a person's health, resulting in increasing health complications and reduced life expectancy. Australia has the highest proportion of children who are overweight in the developed world and the occurrence is gradually increasing. Research from diverse sources suggests that obesity commencing in childhood often continue into adulthood, and treatment of obesity among adults is deemed to yield no long-term success. Australia's health care is changing from an interventionist to a preventive model. Funds are being redirected from secondary level care to primary care. It is presently considered vital to identify children who are obese or have the potential to become obese such that early interventions can be introduced. Putting emphasis in primary health care training to curb obesity will impact nursing practice. Employment of registered nurses with a bachelor degree is currently at the increase in Australia with a view to tackling obese incidences at an early stage. Health checks and preventive care are being permitted in nursing practice to monitor and curb unhealthy weight gain.

Obesity is primarily caused by a combination of excessive energy food intake, absence of physical exercise, and gene vulnerability, although some cases are caused by medication or endocrine disorders. The prevalence of obesity among the people in Australia has been on the rise for the past 30 years. In 2012, approximately 60% adults in Australia were categorized has obese and 25% of children of age 3-18 were obese. The ministry of federal health acknowledged that overweight and obesity are the major health risks with more than 3 million people in Australia presently obese and the number is anticipated to hit 7 million by 2025 (ABS, 2012). Obesity and overweight have a considerable impact on the role of a registered nurse and nursing practice in Australia. Chang et al., (2012, p. 1370) discloses that nursing practice

changes in regard to the needs of patients, workload distribution, and changing opportunities in the labor force.

Mills and Fitzgerald (2010) points that the nursing career is being acknowledged with a view to expanding and strengthening nursing practice in taming obesity in Australia. The government of Australia is concerned about the increasing rates of obesity and overweight, which have triggered the introduction of new funding schemes channeled to primary care providers. The scope of nursing practice is changing to reflect agreed job description due to increasing incidences of obesity. Adjustments to the role of registered nurses are influenced by the practice as a result of diverted new funds and nurse's identification of new work that will conform to the strategic vision.

Chang et al. (2012, p. 1375) indicates that the responsibilities of registered nurses are influenced by the prevalence of obesity and overweight in Australia. A study done by a nurse-led intervention in Australia found that a brief intervention to increase the number of children with BMI measured and receiving counseling on obesity and physical activity was efficient in changing the perception of parents in regard to feeding practices. Findings from a study done in primary care among adult patients indicate that nurse intervention can effectively curb risk factors thus enhancing the role of nurses to manage and prevent obesity (Rashid, 2010, p. 1665).

A significant number of nurses work in primary health care set-up and are engaged as maternal and child health nurses, school nurses, general practice nurses, occupational health nurses, community health nurses, nurse practitioners and rural & remote nurses. Primary health care is the vital constituent of health reform essential to tackle concerns challenging the population in Australia. Preceding approaches to tackle the epidemic of obesity in Australia have stressed on particular interventions such as exercise and diet rather than on primary health care

providers who can engage effective interventions to ensure long term results are achieved (Rashid, 2010, p. 1660). Research evidence have revealed that nurses provide effective health care that have positive results and high satisfying level to patients and quality of life. Building on the capacity of nursing to offer primary health care and additional investment in nursing roles will progress the constructive results (Nolan et al., 2012).

Children with incidences of obese are more often seen in primary care and it is critical that nurses need to be capable of recognizing and intervening with parents to avert continuing excess weight gain. Previous studies have revealed that further support and training of nurses can have considerable impact on detrimental cases of obesity in children; however, diminutive work has been embraced in Australia to equip them in preventing obesity. Chang et al. reports that nurses in general practice aspire to be engaged in preventive care and welcome further training in regard to obesity among children; and a short training seminar that can help in preventing obesity be included in a child health check (Chang et al., 2012, p. 1361).

Currently, general practices are employing practice nurses at an increasing trend in Australia. Practice nurses are generally Registered Nurses with a bachelor degree credentials. 2010-11 information indicates that more than 10,000 nurses are presently employed in general practice with a major task of preventing obesity and overweight by early intervention methods (ABS, 2012). Latest systematic assessment divulged that in the primary care framework responsibilities in nursing practice are extended to include preliminary screening, follow-up, parental help, information exchange and support as a promising approach to prevent unhealthful weight gain among children thus curtailing obesity incidences (Chang et al.,2012, p. 1363). Medicare item numbers and block payments to practices have permitted an extension of the nursing practice role to involve health checks and preventive care. For instance, one preventive

care item known as the Healthy Kids Check was introduced in 2009 to monitor unhealthy weight gain. Health check is delivered by a nurse and involves weight and height measurement and then plotting BMI; although the subject of eating habits and exercise is optional. The practice provides ample opportunity to infuse behaviors that enhance healthful weight gains in children as well as adults (Verweij et al., 2011).

The proportion of people who are overweight and obese is alarming in Australia and the prevalence is gradually increasing. Unhealthy lifestyle especially excessive energy food intake in the current generation is to blame for obese cases. Obesity during childhood and adolescence persist to adulthood thus primary health care programs need to be introduced to curb the menace at an early stage. Obesity has strongly impacted the role and scope of nursing practice in Australia and the government is diverting funds to promote primary care nurses. To attain development in reducing obesity the primary care and nurses' workforce should be expanded both in number and scope to tackle health education requirements of the people. The Australian government should introduce incentives to employ nurses in a number of primary health care set-up including paid nursing refresher and scholarships for nursing in primary health care.

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