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Let’s Go! 2022–2023 Educational Programs: Developing a Standardized Obesity Medicine Curriculum through a Realist Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Problem: Obesity is linked to more than 200 chronic conditions, lower quality of life, and worse outcomes for patients. Let’s Go! is a community engagement initiative that works with communities to create environments that support healthy behaviors that impact obesity. Let’s Go! provides educational programming for all medical learners and providers throughout Maine and Carroll County, New Hampshire. The goal of Let’s Go! is to address the health outcomes of obesity and the stigma associated with it, including its impact on patients’ mental health and clinicians’ unconscious biases.

Approach: We used a realist evaluation, a framework in which the social world is viewed with real impacts, on programs of the Let’s Go! 2022–2023 health care educational programs and initiatives (ie, what interventions work for who and why). Qualitative data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews of clinicians who participated in these recent programs. These data were coded to determine themes and, ultimately, Contexts, Mechanisms, and Outcomes surrounding obesity education and management. Seven interviews were coded using 50 different codes. From the codes, themes were analyzed.

Outcomes: A lack of organizational support (Context) led to a lack of appropriate time to dedicate to the activities (Mechanism), reducing the ability to have the full learning and confidence desired (Outcome). When developing future educational interventions, the context of organizational support is essential for adequate outcomes. Before implementing future educational interventions, programs should address an organization’s support for providers.

Next Steps: Let’s Go! will continue to work with partners at MaineHealth and Tufts University School of Medicine over the coming years to design and integrate a comprehensive obesity medicine curriculum into future educational opportunities for all medical learners and care team members. The iterative nature of this innovative educational approach will support continual improvements as new modalities are implemented and reviewed.

Keywords: Obesity, Curriculum, Education, Medical education

1. Problem

Obesity currently affects 42% of adults and almost 20% of children and adolescents in the United States. Obesity is linked to more than 200 chronic conditions, lower quality of life, and worse outcomes for patients with this disease. The goal of Let’s Go! is to address not only health outcomes of obesity,
but also the stigma associated with obesity, including its impact on patients’ mental health and clinicians’ unconscious biases.

Why is it important to develop a standardized obesity curriculum?

1. A systematic review from 2020 suggests a deficiency in obesity curricula for medical students, residents, and physicians in training internationally, despite the frequency of obesity in patient populations.  
2. The American Academy of Pediatrics’ 2023 Clinical Practice Guidelines recommend medical schools, other health professional training programs, and boards and professional societies improve education and training.  
3. Clinicians who are not well-prepared to treat obesity as a disease have patients that are not identified, evaluated, nor treated for this chronic disease.

Let’s Go! is a community engagement initiative that works with communities to create environments that support healthy behaviors that impact obesity. Let’s Go! provides educational programming for all medical learners and health care providers throughout Maine and Carroll County, New Hampshire.

Starting in January 2022, Let’s Go! partnered with Maine Medical Center’s Department of Medical Education to evaluate the current state of obesity medicine education and to develop a standard obesity curriculum.

2. Approach

We used a realist evaluation, an educational and philosophical framework in which the social world is viewed with real impacts on programs (ie, what interventions work for who and why), on the Let’s Go! 2022–2023 health care educational programs and initiatives. These initiatives included: an Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) program, culinary medicine initiative, spaced-repetition recall “games,” and short videos highlighting important topics. Analyzing these educational activities were timely as Let’s Go! was preparing for professional development opportunities focused on the 2023 American Academy of Pediatrics’ clinical practice obesity guidelines.

The learning objectives of the Let’s Go! obesity curriculum include:

1. Understand that obesity is a chronic, relapsing, multifactorial disease that involves an excessive amount of body fat.
2. Recognize the increased prevalence of obesity and the comorbid disease processes that accompany it.
3. Identify how stigma and bias affects patients with obesity and the genetic, social, environmental, cultural, and economic risks for this disease.
4. Boost confidence with the evaluation and workup for a patient presenting with obesity.
5. Enhance knowledge of evidence-based lifestyle treatments, including approaches to nutrition, physical activity, and behavioral changes to treat obesity.
6. Improve knowledge of medications that can increase weight and medication treatments for obesity that have been approved by the Federal Drug Administration.
7. Understand the role of weight-loss surgery in treating obesity.

Qualitative data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews of clinicians who participated in these recent programs. The semi-structured interview guide can be found in Box 1. The interview team comprised 2 interviewers. NVivo was used to evaluate and code the transcripts. Data were coded to determine themes and, ultimately, Contexts, Mechanisms, and Outcomes of obesity education and management. The summary of this evaluation will add to the existing quantitative data that the Let’s Go! team already collects (the Let’s Go! 2023 Annual Report is available at https://www.mainehealth.org/lets-go/our-impact).

3. Outcomes

Seven interviews were coded using 50 different codes. From the codes, themes were analyzed, and all the following Context, Mechanism, and Outcome themes were observed:

- A lack of organizational support (Context) led to a lack of appropriate time to dedicate to the activities (Mechanism), reducing the ability to have the full learning and confidence desired (Outcome).
- Inadequate time dedicated to educational activities reduced the ability to have full learning and confidence.
- Obesity training should include specific language to use with patients.
- An interventional format that allows health care providers to form a community with other health care providers can enhance the effectiveness of obesity education and management programs.
See Table 1 for a complete list of Contexts, Mechanisms, and Outcomes.

When developing future educational interventions, the context of organizational support is essential for adequate outcomes. Before implementing future educational interventions, programs should address an organization’s support for providers (eg, protected time).

In expanding the reach of the Let’s Go! curriculum beyond the realist evaluation, we developed and implemented a standardized obesity curriculum through the following measures:

1. Developed the Let’s Go! Obesity curriculum learning objectives.
2. Identified the audience for the curriculum.
3. Delivered lectures.
   a. Let’s Go! Shorts (7 completed; 2 more planned; more information available at https://www.mainehealth.org/lets-go/clinical-settings/provider-training): These shorts are 5-minute animated vignettes on topics, such as obesity is a disease, stigma and bias, words matter, effective—

Table 1. Context, mechanisms, and outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Busy clinical practice</td>
<td>Protected time to participate in planned educational activity without provider penalties</td>
<td>New knowledge and skills learned, and greater sense of competence (SDT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active learning format (eg, in-person conference, virtual group like ECHO)</td>
<td>Connecting with peers perceived to be in similar situations</td>
<td>Builds a sense of community-of-practice (SDT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of practice situations</td>
<td>Choice of frequent, spaced connections with different educational material (eg, videos, expert/peer sessions) (SDT)</td>
<td>New language is used with patients, and changes in practice behavior occurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers’ desires to address obesity and health equity issues</td>
<td>Local leadership support</td>
<td>Sense of confidence and empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to learn state-of-the-art treatment approaches</td>
<td>Periodic, virtual programming for practicing providers (eg, ECHO)</td>
<td>Confidence in prescribing medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of caring about obesity as an issue, and motivation to learn from experts</td>
<td>Activities in which providers can interact safely with experts</td>
<td>Sense of competence as to when to confer with experts (SDT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers’ desire to feel a sense of belonging with others interested in obesity management care</td>
<td>Participation in primarily synchronous activities to connect with others both during and after learning-based activities</td>
<td>Sense of belonging within the community (SDT) and larger network of peers to discuss patient-care issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire of just-in-time teaching activities</td>
<td>Periodic short videos (eg, Just in Five Shorts) about various topics on obesity that can be watched independently and asynchronously (SDT)</td>
<td>Greater confidence in treating patients, and awareness of additional learning materials within the Let’s Go! framework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: ECHO, Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes; SDT, self-determination theory.
### Table 2. What we have done to date.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted group of learners</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical students</td>
<td>Inter-clerkship – culinary medicine, June 2022, September 2023; family medicine rotation lecture every 6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents at MMC (set didactic times)</td>
<td>6 lectures; 3 more planned in 2024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellows at MMC (set didactic times)</td>
<td>1 lecture each in 2023 and 2024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendings at MMC (grand rounds)</td>
<td>3 grand rounds: pediatrics, internal medicine, surgery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendings at MMC (MMC/MH conferences)</td>
<td>2022 Engel Symposium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendings at MMC (statewide conferences)</td>
<td>Let’s Go! Conference - Disparities in Obesity Care 2022, Surgery 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice teams</td>
<td>MAAP - Overview of AAP guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large group meeting with physicians</td>
<td>MAFP - Overview of obesity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical students, residents, fellows, physicians</td>
<td>MAFP 2024 pediatric CPGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical students, residents, fellows, attending physicians</td>
<td>15 Let’s Go! Podcasts developed and delivered; 2 more planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice teams</td>
<td>2 teams; 1 more planned in 2024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large group meeting with physicians</td>
<td>3 meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical students, residents, fellows, physicians</td>
<td>15 Let’s Go! Podcasts developed and delivered; 2 more planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical students, residents, attending physicians</td>
<td>7 Let’s Go! Shorts developed and delivered; 2 more planned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: CPG, clinical practice guideline; MAAP, Maine American Academy of Pediatrics; MAFP, Maine Academy of Family Physicians; MH, MaineHealth; MMC, Maine Medical Center.

*50 educational interventions delivered as of April 12, 2024.

...treatment options, bariatric surgery, and role of physical activity. b. Let’s Talk About Obesity Care Podcast (15 completed; 2 more planned; more information available at [https://letstalkaboutobesitycare.podbean.com/](https://letstalkaboutobesitycare.podbean.com/)): Dr. Carrie Gordon hosts experts on a wide variety of best-practice topics for caring for children and adults with overweight.

See Table 2 for a complete list of what initiatives we have done to date.

### 4. Next steps

Let’s Go! will continue to work with educational partners at Maine Medical Center, Tufts University School of Medicine, and MaineHealth over the coming years to design and integrate a comprehensive obesity medicine curriculum into future educational opportunities for all medical learners and care team members. The iterative nature of this innovative educational approach will support continual improvement as new modalities are implemented and reviewed.

### References