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News

GPs asking patients about weight may add to body shame: Australian of the Year

Body image advocate Taryn Brumfitt says GPs raising weight in appointments could turn patients off seeking healthcare.



[Carmel Sparke](#)



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Taryn Brumfitt. Photo: Body Image Movement website.

Australian of the Year and leading body image advocate Taryn Brumfitt has claimed that GPs risk turning patients off seeking care by raising their weight issues during short consultations.

“Many people in larger bodies tell us they have gone to the doctor with something like a sore knee, and come out with a ‘prescription’ for a very restrictive diet, and no ongoing support,” Ms Brumfitt told Nine Newspapers.

“It’s not helpful in actually changing behaviour, and does a lot of harm.

“When people are made to feel this sort of shame about their bodies and their weight, the main behaviour they change is that they stop engaging with healthcare altogether.”

Ms Brumfitt said GP training was often not nuanced enough to enable the complex discussions required about nutrition, movement and other health behaviours.

A standard consultation was also not long enough to support sustainable change.

“In a 15-minute appointment, there isn’t the time to go into the kind of detail required to support sustainable behaviour change,” she said.

Ms Brumfitt was asked to comment following [US findings](#) that an overweight BMI was not associated with a significantly increased risk of death in those who were otherwise healthy.

But RACGP vice president Dr Bruce Willett said it was a GP’s role to sensitively raise weight issues in appointments, especially those involving comorbidities.

“GPs need to be doing this stuff because we’re the people who see people for all of their comorbidities, which is an opportunity to actually bring this onto the agenda,” Dr Willett told *6minutes*.

“It’s the same as smoking. When someone comes in with a chest infection there is an opportunity to talk to them about maybe stopping smoking...”

“I could point to patients who have literally cured their knee pain with weight loss. So isn’t that better than the surgery?”

He said he would also carefully raise the topic of weight if he picked up cues the patient would like to discuss it, or during an overall health check.

“We do this all the time. Most days I would talk to people about this, but it just needs to be handled with care and delicacy, and with putting people’s genuine interests first rather than anything else.”

He said GPs were the right professionals to be addressing the issue, but they often ended up being caught in the middle of being asked to weigh patients for Practice Incentives Program Quality Improvement payments and media comments asking them to back away.

Read more: [Why this GP is angry at colleagues who encourage weight loss: UK](#)

More information: [Nine Newspapers; 9 July 2023](#)

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