

Sharing Understanding of Obesity – the University of Reading MOOC

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about our online course on obesity produced by the University of Reading in conjunction with FutureLearn; a collaboration between the Open University and 73 other partners. It's what is colloquially known as a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/obesity/>

I want to talk about the philosophy of what we've produced, why we did it and the impact it is having.

It was developed as a spin off from our F2F course at the University, the Certificate in Obesity Management, developed in conjunction with Dr Andrew Brewster, a GP in Caversham, and two people from the RBH, Lisa Lovell, dietitian and Dr Moghah Elshiekh, endocrinologist.

The target audience for that programme were HCPs and basically anyone involved in supporting people to lose weight. We've had a wide variety of participants over the last 6 years from Harley Street consultants to boot camp fitness trainers.

What I realised was that whoever you were and wherever you were from there was so much we all had to learn, not just from the experts but also from each other.

So I decided to take the key elements from day one of the programme and cover them over 4 weeks in an online course. Hence the MOOC.

In week one we look at the statistics of obesity with some graphic visualisation of maps showing how the picture has changed in the USA and UK over the last 20 years. I also thought it was important for everyone to think about the perceptions we have about obesity and to understand some of the prejudices that may be held. For that we use some patient testimonies sharing their own experiences. We also start to bring in the concept of obesity being a multifactorial problem.

In week two we look at the measurement of obesity, taking about BMI, waist circumference and waist to height ratio. That enables us to introduce the concept of visceral fat and how waist circumference is the best indicator of health risk, showing some of the correlations that exist between waist circumference and heart disease, diabetes etc.

Week three discusses the multifactorial nature of the causes of the obesity epidemic. We look at the complex systems diagram produced for the Foresight report and work our way through some of the various factors, including some of the more recent correlations with obesity such as light exposure! We look at the effects of yo-yo dieting and "portion distortion". We also start to address some of the current dietary controversies of fat vs sugar.

The final week draws together what all this means in terms of health. Our revelation that fat is not an inert thing, like a package of cooking fat, but an active endocrine organ, secreting numerous chemicals which affect health is perhaps the most startling fact to many of our participants. And I think that understanding that has the biggest impact. We go through the morbidities that obesity will have an impact on. Those such as diabetes and hypertension are often previously understood, but others such as cancer and asthma are often not previously appreciated. We also look at the fat and fit vs thin and unfit debate and thus encourage activity.

So to summarise the course, we do not offer solutions just increased awareness to promote new behaviours and change habits.

I think one of the successes of the course is that people have been sharing some of the learning:

Fantastic course and I am constantly telling my work colleagues about the benefits of this course. I have changed some of my approach to eating too and meets my initial objective for signing up initially.

I have really enjoyed studying the course and although I do acknowledge that there are many factors contributing towards obesity, the section on the health consequences of obesity, has made me refocus my effort on reducing my weight to move out of the obese category.

I have really enjoyed this well presented, and informative course through which I have increased my knowledge of obesity and its possible causes and effects. I can put this newly gained information to good use.

A very useful course, excellently presented, great format and useful to read fellow course members comments. I now feel much more empowered to go on and lead a healthy lifestyle. Thank you to all who have played a part in this

It wouldn't of course be normal not to have criticism and I think the challenge has been to be all things to all people:

I wanted to understand some of the underlying physiological effects and causes and to a great extent these expectations were met but I sometimes found too great a disjunction between the lay explanations and the medical papers.

So far we have had around 20,000 in total join the three runs of the course, although as you might expect not all become active learners and from recent statistics around half of these became active learners with half of those becoming social learners i.e. those who contribute to the discussion forums.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about the MOOC or our face to face course.

Angela Alexander

10/11/15

a.m.alexander@reading.ac.uk