

Clinical Information

Obesity as a Showcase for Transdisciplinary Research*

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Key Words

Obesity · Transdisciplinarity · SSH · Horizon2020 · EU

Abstract

Obesity is one of the main health problems in the world with high societal and individual costs. To tackle the obesity epidemic, we need to collaborate across scientific borders to fundamentally broaden the perspectives on the obesity epidemic as a complex phenomenon.

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Obesity is a rapidly growing public health challenge heading to be one of the main health problems in the world with high societal and individual costs. More so, severe obesity is a gateway to many other chronic diseases such as type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular and heart diseases and cancer as well as to a multitude of social and psychological adverse conditions affecting quality of life, mental health, physical health and health and care costs as well as the efficiency of the workforce. We already know that to fully unravel the challenge of the obesity epidemic we must take into account the obesogenic environment, the obese citizens and the way society and individuals address obesity. Insights from Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) will radically broaden the perspective on the obesity epidemic. The point of view of the obese, their rights and statuses as citizens, their life stories, narratives etc. will be included, as well as questions about the impact of obesity discourse on the non-obese population and on other societal issues pertaining to history, social conditions, morality, law, aesthetics, psychology and so forth.

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In other words, to address obesity as a complex phenomenon, there is a need for integrating and mobilizing all relevant scientific disciplines building true transdisciplinary research, which requires determination from all sides. We need to change and broaden our view on obesity by looking at the role of social structures, social inequality and stigma associated with obesity, the cost-effectiveness of initiatives and interventions and critically evaluate the potentials in choice architecture, behaviour change and various forms of policy development and political regulation. At the same time, we also need to heighten the awareness of societal effects and consequences of the obesity epidemic.

Sciences such as economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political sciences, architecture and urban planning, ethnology, philosophy, history, geography, communication and information sciences, science and technology studies and many more disciplines within the SSH all hold a piece of this highly complex puzzle. By combining these scientific fields with nutritional and clinical research, physical activity, biomedical sciences and epidemiology, we will be able to answer new questions and thereby securing new findings, solutions and greater impact in obesity research. Thus, the future potentials in obesity research aim at adding to our understanding of the complex system of mechanism of obesity. The impact of such research includes identification of arenas for health promotion, prevention and policy making and offers a spectrum of refined and personalized approaches to treatment, which balance the responsibility of the society and the autonomy of the citizens.

Social Sciences and Humanities' Contribution to Tackle the Obesity Epidemic

On January 9–10, 2013, more than 50 researchers and stakeholders from around Europe gathered in Brussels for the workshop 'Social Sciences and Humanities contribution to Tackle the Obesity Epidemic: Challenges & Potentials in Obesity Research towards Horizon 2020' (for more information of the workshop, please see www.foodfitnesspharma.ku.dk/ssh/; for more information on Horizon 2020, please visit http://ec.europa.eu/research/horizon2020/index_en.cfm).

The workshop was initiated by the Danish SSH research community in the area of obesity research, and organized in cooperation with the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO). It builds upon a movement of on-going European and national initiatives across Denmark, France and Germany, with the common objective to outline obesity-related national research priorities and roadmaps.

The objectives of the workshop were to create a cross-European forum for identifying, describing and discussing future potentials in obesity research, to establish new and nurture existing networks and collaborations of researchers across social sciences and humanities and the natural sciences with an interest in obesity research, and hereby to mobilize the significant European research capacities and potentials in preparing for Horizon 2020.

The main session was the round table discussion, which took its starting point in 7 pre-defined themes. The themes built on some of the expectations and potentials for future obesity research, as previously identified by political stakeholders and researchers.

Delivering Innovative Research with a High Societal Impact

The participants were asked to identify future research potentials for each of the themes and to discuss which impact such research would have for addressing the obesity epidemic. Further, necessary scientific collaborators, interested stakeholders and potentials, pitfalls and barriers were identified.

Through the round table discussion, it was clear that, by combining the scientific disciplines embattling a societal challenge like obesity, we can pave the way for untapped and promising possibilities which can address obesity as a complex phenomenon. Some of the potential future research questions developed at the workshop was the following:

How can we contribute to the creation of a robust common evidence base, by creating new tools, measurements and databases, enlarging the scope of assessing the extend and costs of obesity, costs and benefits of interventions and investments in prevention and treatment (including economy as well as social, psychological and societal costs of obesity nationally and across Europe)?

What are the moral dimensions of obesity – including the question of personal or structural responsibility – e.g. in relation to the justifiability of interventions?

How do urban environments affect physical activity and food consumption (food availability and promotion, food outlets and supermarkets as part of the urban environment)?

How can we effectively conduct follow-up research on interventions and programmes to make them more effective and inclusive by focusing on how treatment programmes are received and handled?

How can choice architecture and nudging be used effectively to change behaviour?

How does BMI function as a vehicle for stigmatization brought about by the health and care sector, by the community and media, by the industry and through self-stigmatization?

By strengthening new collaborations in obesity research from SSH across the natural sciences, we can enrich obesity and nutritional research. By expanding our common understanding and focusing on a broader spectrum of research questions we can cross scientific borders and help unravel one of the great challenges for research today: making it possible to identify the key issues that will push our scientific frontiers to achieve the greatest social, economic and societal impact for the citizens.

Support

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Scientific Advisory Committee for the Workshop

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