

## Slimming clubs: A solution for your patient?

Lucy Vickers BSc (Hons)

The slimming club industry is thriving in the UK where millions of overweight and obese people are desperate to find a solution for their weight concerns. Lucy Vickers, Weight Watchers Nutritionist, sheds some light on how the Weight Watchers programme could be an effective solution for your patients.

### Obesity in the UK

19.9 million and 15.1 million adults are currently overweight and obese respectively with predictions that 50% of women, 60% of men and 25% of children could be obese by 2050<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to it being 'normal' to be overweight, market research surveys show;

- up to 90% of people suffer from 'fat blindness' - not recognising when someone is overweight or obese
- 25% can't recognise a morbidly obese person<sup>2</sup>

### Weight Watchers: Then and now

In 1996, Weight Watchers launched the **POINTS**<sup>®</sup> Weight Loss System, which gives all foods and drinks a **POINTS** value based on the calorie and saturated fat content of the portion. Members are able to eat flexibly, fitting their weight loss into their lifestyle and preferences whilst creating an energy deficit for a safe rate of weight loss and following a food plan that is low in saturated fat. At the time of launching it was a revolution; healthy weight loss in one simple counting system.

Offering a wide range of services, products and publications for those interested in healthy weight loss and weight control there are approximately 1.3 million members attending almost 50,000 Weight Watchers meetings a week in 30 countries around the world. In the UK over 6,500 meetings are held each week led by over 1,700 trained leaders, all who have lost weight with Weight Watchers.

The current programme is called The Discover Plan<sup>™</sup>, which is based on the **POINTS** Weight Loss System. Each member has a daily **POINTS** allowance personalised for their energy needs, based on height, age, gender, weight and day to day activity levels. To lose weight members stick within their personal allowance. This system is designed to lead to a healthy and sustainable rate of weight loss of up to 2lbs a week whilst helping members learn about the importance of setting achievable goals and the potential health and wellbeing benefits of losing just a few pounds. The plan also helps guide members to make healthy and satisfying choices, by making most vegetables zero **POINTS** values and clearly identifying choices that are low in energy density and high in lean proteins (called Filling Foods).

### A holistic approach to weight loss

While the elements of individual weight-loss plans have changed over the years, the fundamental Weight Watchers '4-way approach' philosophy to

## Slimming clubs: A solution for your patient?

Lucy Vickers BSc (Hons)

healthy weight loss remains unchanged and is supported by scientific research, analysis and experience. To lose weight safely and sensibly, a person must learn to;

- **eat healthier**
- increase **physical activity**
- create and live in a supportive environment conducive to achieving a healthy weight – **group support**
- manage the challenges involved in **changing behaviours**

The supportive environment of the meetings has a dose-response effect; people who attend the greatest number of meetings have the greatest weight loss<sup>3</sup>. This phenomenon has been verified by independent clinical trials, whereby weekly group support has been found to be independently and significantly associated with weight loss success<sup>4</sup>. Weekly meetings provide motivation, inspiration and support which tend to keep people on their weight loss journeys for longer.

A weekly healthy weight loss curriculum is delivered through the discussion section of the meeting and the weekly programme materials (a mini magazine 'Your Week'). It's really interesting, because more and more people want to come to Weight Watchers not just for weight loss support, but to learn about living a healthy lifestyle. Weekly meetings are designed to be interactive, animated and encourage hands-on learning through group discussion, offering guidance and tools to help individuals stay motivated and achieve weight-loss goals. All members are weighed in a confidential environment on regularly calibrated scales.

### Committed to an evidence based approach

Weight Watchers is a responsible science based company. All material released by the company is approved by a qualified health professional registered with the UK Health Professions Council (HPC).

Weight Watchers:

- have published 61 original scientific publications to date
- have an active presence in public health affairs at national and international level
- contribute to government and national health guidance consultations
- share best practice
- maintain purposeful links with obesity groups

### Outline of key papers

- A 2003 randomised controlled trial compared two weight loss methods; Weight Watchers and self-help. After 1 and 2 years, body weight, BMI and waist circumference were more significantly decreased in participants assigned to the Weight Watchers group. Regular meeting attendance was significantly correlated with both weight loss and weight loss maintenance<sup>5</sup>.

## Slimming clubs: A solution for your patient?

Lucy Vickers BSc (Hons)

- Referral to the Weight Watchers programme has been proven to enhance weight loss achieved in primary care, demonstrating the potential efficacy benefits for large scale provision of Weight Watchers. 772 obese participants were randomised to either 12 months of standard care (SC) by a physician in general practice or free vouchers for attendance at Weight Watchers (WW). Among completers, mean weight losses were significantly greater in WW than SC (-6.87 kg SEM 0.43 vs. -3.17 kg SEM 0.34;  $p < 0.001$ ). 61% of WW participants vs. 32% of SC participants lost 5% or more of initial weight<sup>6</sup>.
- Weight Watchers and weight loss sustainability.

Intervention	Study Type	Follow-up	Publication
Weight Watchers	RCT	2 years	Henshka <i>et al.</i> , JAMA 2003
Weight Watchers	Observational Study	5 years	Lowe <i>et al.</i> , BJN 2007
Weight Watchers, Slim Fast, Rosemary Conley, Dr Atkins	RCT	1 year	Truby H <i>et al.</i> , BMJ 2006

- Based on corrected weights from a national telephone survey of Lifetime Members, weight regain ranged between 31.5% and 76.5%<sup>7</sup>. At 5 years, 19.4% were within 5 pounds of their original weight goal, 42.6% maintained a loss of 5% or more, and 70.3% were below their initial weight.

### Weight Watchers NHS referral scheme

Over the past 6 years Weight Watchers has invested in a weight loss intervention which the NHS can commission for overweight and obese adults. Currently, over two thirds of the Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) in England engage with the Weight Watchers Referral Scheme (WWRS) which consists of a pack for 12 weeks' worth of Weight Watchers meetings. Each PCT sets its own criteria for eligibility, choosing to focus on treatment and / or prevention of overweight and obesity.

A 2010, independent audit on over 29,000 patients who have been through the scheme, found that 54.1% of referrals attended every meeting of the 12 week intervention, with 58% completing 10 meetings or more<sup>8</sup>.

## Slimming clubs: A solution for your patient?

Lucy Vickers BSc (Hons)

	Median weight loss (kg)	Median % initial weight loss	% $\geq$ 5% baseline weight	% $\geq$ 10% baseline weight
All Referrals	2.8	3.1	33	6.8
Completers	5.2	5.5	55	12.2

The Foresight team forecasted that this intervention, which achieves a modest weight loss, could, if maintained for life, result in a 20% reduction in individual risk of diabetes and healthcare cost savings of over £1,860 per intervention person<sup>9</sup>. If the NHS were to refer overweight / obese people to the WWRS, currently costing £45, it could save £6.4 Billion on full economic costs in the period up to 2080. A large (industrial) scale application could result in considerable savings to society and government and improvement in health outcomes for individuals.

### Conclusion

Potentially, over half the adult population in the UK needs access to some sort of weight management service. The NHS has limited capacity to tackle this rising epidemic. In contrast, Weight Watchers has the operational capacity to deliver an industrial scale of service right now, meets NICE best practice standards and is proven to be both cost effective to the NHS and a significantly effective complement to primary care services.

### References

1. Foresight. Tackling Obesities: Future Choices – Project Report. *Government Office for Science* 2007
2. McCann. London's 'Fatville' Survey 2009
3. Melanson KJ and Lowndes J. Type 2 diabetes risk reduction in overweight and obese adults through multidisciplinary group sessions: effects of meeting attendance. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 2010; 4:275-281
4. Sacks, F *et al.* Comparison of Weight Loss Diets with Different Compositions of Fat, Protein and Carbohydrates. *NEJM* 2000;360; 9, 859-973
5. Heshka S *et al.* Weight Loss with Self-help compared with a structured commercial programme : a randomised controlled trial. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2003; 289 (14): 1792-1798.  
, *JAMA* 2003; 289 (14), 1792 - 1798
6. Jebb SA *et al.* Referral to a Commercial Weight Management Programme Enhances Weight Loss Achieved in Primary Care. (Presented at XI International Congress on Obesity 2010, Stockholm Sweden, July 11-15]
7. Lowe MR *et al.* Weight-Loss Maintenance One to Five Years Following Successful Completion of a Commercial Weight Loss Program. *International Journal of Obesity* 2001; 25: 325-331.
8. Ahern AL *et al.* An Audit of the UK Weight Watchers NHS Referral Scheme. [Presented at XI International Congress on Obesity 2010, Stockholm Sweden, July 11-15]
9. Brown, M and McPherson, K. Computer modelling the health and economic outcomes of the Weight Watchers GP referral scheme, *Obesity Facts*; 2009 2 (Suppl. 2) 115.