PERSPECTIVE

The Emergence of the South-Asia Obesity Forum – A Need of the Hour

Dina Shrestha[1], Aswin Pankajakshan[2], Azra Rizwan[3], Mariyam Niyaz[4], Md. Faruque Pathan[5], Mohammad Wali Naseri[6], Musarrat Riaz[7], Nitin Kapoor[8,9], Payal Buckoreelall Chintaram[10], Prasad Katulanda[11], Ranil Jayawardena[12], Rucha J Mehta[13], Sanjay Kalra[14], Santosh Shakya[15], Shahjada Selim[16], Sidrah Lodhi[17]

[1]Norvic International Hospital, Kathmandu, Bagmati, Nepal
[2]Dept. of Endocrinology, NMC Royal Hospital, Dubai
[3]Diabetes and Endocrinology, Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH), Consultant Endocrinologist, Karachi, Pakistan
[4]Dept. of Endocrinology, Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, Male' Maldives
[5]Director Academy, BIRDEM General Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh
[6]Dept. of Endocrinology, Kabul University of Medical Sciences, Kabul, Afghanistan
[7]Baqai institute of Diabetology and Endocrinology, Baqai Medical University, Karachi, Pakistan
[8]Dept. of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism, Christian Medical College, Vellore, India
[9]NCD Unit, Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute, Melbourne, Australia
[10]Dr AG Jeetoo Hospital, Mauritius, Port Louis, Mauritius
[11]Dept. of Clinical Medicine, University of Colombo, Consultant Endocrinologist and Diabetologist, National Hospital of Sri Lanka
[12]Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka
[13]EDMO Clinic, Cardiometabolic Department Apollo CVHF, Ahmedabad, India
[14]Consultant Endocrinologist, Bharti Hospital, Karnal, India
[15]Chief Hospital Analyst, AaRuS Lifestyle Hospital, Lalitpur, Bagmati, Nepal
[16]Dept. of Endocrinology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
[17]Division of Endocrinology, Dept. of Medicine, King Edward Medical University, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

Obesity has reached pandemic proportions globally and, in the South Asian countries. However, the rate of increase in the South East Asian region is alarming. This rapid increase is not only associated with a sharp increase in the metabolic and psychosocial complications of obesity but also will be a huge burden on the health economics of these developing countries in this region. This manuscript details the need and the scope of having a united and focused group of specialists from different South Asian countries to address the challenges related to the obesity pandemic and mitigate its impact in the region. The South-Asia obesity forum is a consortium of obesity researchers from 7 South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, who will work together to achieve the objectives of this forum in the field of obesity education, research and advocacy.

Keywords: South Asian Obesity Forum (SOF), obesity, obesity related advocacy and policy change, obesity education, related research, thin fat obesity

Address for correspondence
Dr Dina Shreshta
Consultant Endocrinologist
Norvic International Hospital
Kathmandu, Bagmati, Nepal
E-mail: dinadoc@yahoo.com

Introduction

Obesity has reached pandemic proportions globally, as evidenced by the data recently published by world obesity atlas (2024), wherein about 42% of the global population is said to have overweight or obese status. However, in the South East Asian region (SEARO) the current prevalence of 26% is likely to increase to 39% by 2030. Of the South Asian member countries, India (40 million women, 24 million men) and Pakistan (13 million women and 7 million men) rank in the top 15 countries across the world, affected by obesity. Maldives and Bhutan are expected to have the highest prevalence, within South-Asia, (18% and 13% in women, 10% and 8% in men) by 2030[1]. It must be noted that these figures are calculated using a generic body mass index (BMI) cut-off of 30 kg/m2[2]. This rapid increase is not only is associated with a sharp increase in the metabolic and psychosocial complications of obesity but also will be a huge burden on the health economics of these developing counties in this region[3].

Need for a South Asian Obesity Focussed Consortium

Obesity groups and societies are professional organizations that bring together health care professionals specializing in the field

of obesity management and treatment. In countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Afghanistan, where obesity rates are on the rise, these societies can serve as a cornerstone in the fight against this epidemic[4]. By providing a platform for collaboration, education, and advocacy, such forums can empower physicians with the knowledge and tools needed to tackle obesity at individual and population levels in the region.

At the heart of the need for obesity forums in the South Asian region is the complexity of obesity as a medical condition. Obesity is not just a matter of excess weight; it is a multifaceted disease with genetic, environmental, and behavioral determinants. Managing obesity requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond simple diet and exercise recommendations. Physicians need to understand the underlying causes of obesity, such as hormonal imbalances, genetic predispositions, and psychological factors, to provide effective and personalized care to their patients[5].

Obesity forums like South Asian obesity forum (SOF) can bridge this knowledge gap by offering specialized training and resources to health care professionals. By organizing conferences, workshops, and training programs, these societies can keep physicians abreast of the latest research and best practices in obesity management. They can also facilitate networking and collaboration among health care providers, fostering a multidisciplinary approach to obesity treatment that involves dietitians, psychologists, and other specialists. Moreover, such societies can help draft region-specific clinical practice guidelines that can help provide patient-specific advice to patients. This is especially relevant to the South Asian region as the obesity phenotype is different in this population, with a much higher proportion of body fat at a lower BMI. Something which is often referred to as the thin fat phenotype[6].

In addition to education and training, obesity societies can also play a crucial role in advocacy and policy development. By raising awareness about the impact of obesity on public health and advocating for policies that promote healthy lifestyles, these societies can help create an enabling environment for obesity prevention and treatment. This may involve collaborating with government agencies, health care institutions, and community organizations to implement initiatives such as obesity screening programs, nutrition education campaigns, and infrastructure improvements that support physical activity.

Furthermore, obesity forums like SOF can also serve as a catalyst for research and innovation in the field of obesity medicine. By funding research projects, supporting clinical trials, and fostering collaboration with academic institutions, these societies can drive advancements in obesity treatment and care. This can lead to developing new therapies, interventions, and technologies that improve outcomes for patients with obesity and related conditions. The SOF is a consortium of obesity researchers from 8 South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, who will work together to achieve the objectives of this forum in the field of obesity education, research and advocacy. The scope and objectives of the SOF are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. The Scope and Objectives of the South Asian Obesity Forum

Improve health awareness regarding obesity in the region.
Conduct periodic training programs for physicians and related allied health specialists who are involved in the management of obesity.
Formulate and disseminate region specific guidelines on obesity management.
Foster multicountry research in the region related to obesity.
Help in advocacy and policy change required in South Asian countries to improve obesity management in the region.

More recently, the South-Asia Federation of Endocrine Societies in Nepal published a Kathmandu declaration on the 17th day of March 2023, declaring that obesity is a chronic, relapsing, multifaceted, multisystemic endocrine disease that needs timely and sustained attention at a clinical as well as public health level. Through its member associations, the declaration aimed to ensure optimal obesity-related health care delivery in South-Asia and to improve the obesity pandemic in the region[1].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the need for obesity forums for physicians in the South Asian region is clear and pressing. As the region grapples with a rising tide of obesity and its associated health risks, there is an urgent need for specialized support systems that can empower health care professionals to address this challenge effectively. By providing education, training, advocacy, and research support, SOF can play a vital role in shaping the future of obesity medicine in South-Asia and improving the health and well-being of millions of people affected by this disease.

References

1. Shrestha D, Kalra S, Somasundaram N, Dhakal GP, Selim S, Naseri MW, et al. The Kathmandu Declaration – Obesity in the South Asian region: An exigency statement. Clinic Epidemi Global Health. 2023;22:101315.
2. Kapoor N, Furler J, Paul TV, Thomas N, Oldenburg B. Ethnicity-specific cut-offs that predict comorbidities: the way forward for optimal utility of obesity indicators. J Biosoc Sci. 2019;51(4):624-26.
3. Kapoor N, Arora S, Kalra S. Setting up an obesity clinic - The SMART approach. J Pak Med Assoc. 2023;73(9):1916-18.
4. Kapoor N, Sahay R, Kalra S, Bajaj S, Dasgupta A, Shrestha D, et al. Consensus on Medical Nutrition Therapy for Diabesity (CoMeND) in adults: A South Asian Perspective. Diabetes Metab Syndr Obes. 2021;14:1703-28.
5. Kalra S, Das S, Kota S, Anne B, Kumar A, Punyani H, et al. Barophenotypic characterization - The key to Person Centric Management of Obesity. Indian J Endocrinol Metab. 2021;25(4):295-98.
6. Kapoor N, Feingold KR, Anawalt B, Blackman MR, Boyce A, Chrousos G, et al. Thin fat obesity: The tropical phenotype of obesity. Endotext. South Dartmouth (MA): MDText.com, Inc.; 2000.

■ ■ ■ ■