

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

# ADVOCATE

YOUR ROLE AS A PATIENT

by Barbara Thompson & Joseph Nadglowski, Jr.

**F**or those of you who are post-op, think back to how you felt when you were approved. Remember the joy that you felt and the hope for a healthier, happier life. Now, imagine the despair that is felt by the thousands who have no hope because they have been denied insurance coverage. It is as if they have been thrown a lifeline only to have it suddenly pulled out of their grasp.

When the appeals have been exhausted and there is no possibility of self pay, where do the thousands who have been denied coverage turn? They are turning to you. You can be a patient advocate and make a huge difference in these peoples' lives. You can raise your voice and let the world know that this life altering and often life saving surgery should be available to everyone who qualifies. Let them know that denial of coverage is unacceptable. Be the voice to counter the negative publicity that weight-loss surgery often gets in the press. Be the voice to tell the realistic rather than sensationalist story about bariatric surgery.

## Getting the OK

It was the Fall of 1999 and I was ready. I had selected my surgeon, Dr. Phil Schauer, and I completed all of my testing. All that remained was my insurance approval for my weight-loss surgery. I waited. I worried and then I got the word. I was approved! I was so relieved that I wept. That approval said to me that my "failure" with my weight was the result of a disease that my insurance company recognized. It wasn't all because of a weakness on my part.

Since my surgery in 1999, insurance approval has become more challenging. We are now seeing some states, such as Florida, in which insurance coverage is almost non-existent. Other insurance companies are requiring such extensive medically supervised dieting that the requirements are a barrier to care. I was lucky that my surgery was before it became more difficult to obtain coverage. But there are thousands who are still waiting for that approval who aren't as lucky as I was.

## Becoming a Patient Advocate

Becoming a patient advocate is as simple as letting some key people, such as legislators, regulators, the media, insurance providers and many more, know just how important weight-loss surgery has been in your life.

In order to become proactive advocates for change, those affected by obesity need to educate themselves about obesity, its complications and treatments. The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC), a non-profit, patient-based organization dedicated to educating and advocating for the obese and morbidly obese, offers a wide variety of resources for the pre- and post-operative patient.

## Why Should I Advocate?

Obesity is a complex disease. The obese and morbidly obese often experience a wide variety of health conditions (co-morbidities), which include diabetes, heart disease, cancer, sleep apnea and many more. Adding to the challenge, patients are often denied access to much needed medical treatment (such as medically managed weight-loss or bariatric surgery) as some payors and employers still do not recognize obesity and morbid obesity as a disease.

Patients can impact how others view obesity and impact decision makers, eliminate the negative stigma associated with this disease, make sure that obesity is treated as a disease and allow for increased access to safe and effective medical treatment.

## Educate Legislators

A great way to get started advocating is to contact those that make the laws, rules and regulations regarding your healthcare – the government. Your state and local representatives work for you, so why not tell them what you need? As an American, it is your right to build a relationship with your elected officials and to advocate for positive change. It is through the voice of patients, that legislators learn how laws impact Americans.

There are a variety of ways you can reach out to your legislators including mail, e-mail, phone, attending town hall meetings or in person. No matter how you choose to communicate, be as clear and concise

as possible. Share your personal story with your elected official and encourage your family and friends to do the same.

To find your representative, visit the "Advocacy" section of the OAC Web site at [www.obesityaction.org](http://www.obesityaction.org).

## Educate Regulators

In addition to elected officials, those who work for the government agencies that regulate healthcare play a major role. Such agencies include the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control, among many others. Often times, regulatory agencies welcome patient participation through public comment periods on proposed policies. Public comments are a great opportunity to share your view on a proposed regulation.

## Educate the Media

In the U.S., the media is tremendously influential. Encourage your local media to produce accurate stories on obesity. Do not hesitate to contact local newspaper reporters and/or television health reporters and share your story. Try to build a good relationship with the local media by providing accurate information and timely responses.

## Educate Insurers and Employers

Does your health insurance company offer coverage for obesity treatment? If you have been seeking treatment, you may already know. If you do not know, find out by calling the member services number on your insurance card. If coverage is not offered or you believe the procedures to access care are too complicated, do not hesitate to write the medical director of the insurance company and ask for an explanation.

OAC offers a comprehensive guide, titled *Working with Your Insurance Provider: A Guide to Seeking Weight-Loss Surgery*, that will help you get the knowledge needed to successfully work with insurance providers. It offers information discussing the effects of obesity and morbid obesity, tips for working with the provider, detailed information concerning the treatment options available for morbid obesity and much more. To order, please contact the OAC at 800.717.3117.

## Educate the General Public

We have already discussed the influence the media has on the general public, but you can have an influence as well. It is important that the public receive accurate information on the risks and treatments of obesity. You can be the source of such information by volunteering to speak on obesity at your place of worship, service club (Rotary Club, etc.) and/or your place of employment. Share your personal story, it will be tremendously influential.

## Be Your Own Advocate

Learn as much as you can about obesity, its risks and treatments to best take care of yourself. Not only will you likely improve your own quality of life and quality of health, you will be an inspiration to others.

## One More Thing to Do

There is one additional way that you can be a patient advocate and that is to be a successful weight-loss surgery patient. In some ways we have been given a gift - a gift of a second chance at life. It is a gift not to be taken for granted. Your success can be a shining example to the world that weight loss surgery does work, does change lives and should be available to all. ■



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