Addressing Obesity: A Quantitative Evaluation of the Weight Management Pilot Project Undertaken in West Cornwall

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A priority outcome in Cornwall's Local Area Agreement is to 'halt the rise in obesity' (Cornwall Strategic Partnership, 2006). This pilot project formed part of Weight Management West, an initiative designed to address obesity trends financed by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, which targets areas identified as highly deprived by the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Aims

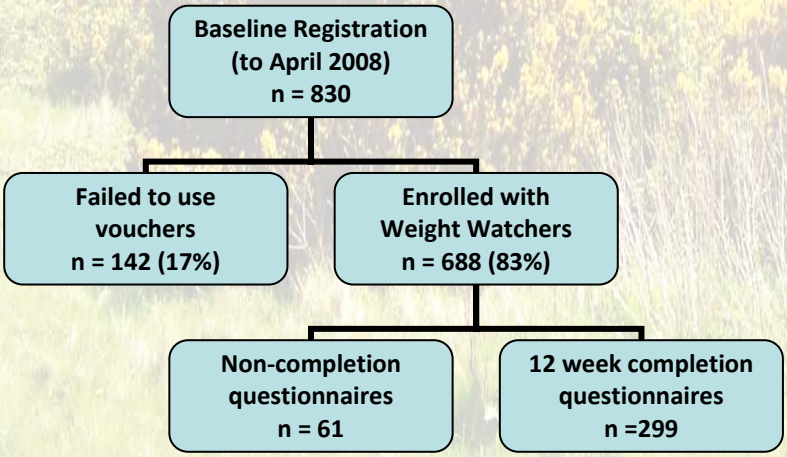
The aim of this study was to examine whether the issuing of free vouchers for a commercial slimming class (Weight Watchers) was successful in producing weight loss in individuals in the short-term, as well as providing a greater awareness of the benefits of a healthier lifestyle.

Methods

The project began in March 2007 and aimed to recruit 1000 obese patients (BMI > 30 kg/m^2) from GP practices in West Cornwall, providing free vouchers for enrolment in a local 12-week Weight Watchers programme. Fourteen GP surgeries took part in the study. All patients issued with vouchers completed a registration questionnaire which provided baseline data, and further questionnaires were completed by telephone as clients progressed through the scheme. For those enrolling with Weight Watchers, weight was recorded at the beginning and end of the 12 weeks. The questionnaires covered lifestyle (smoking, alcohol, diet and exercise), attitude to weight loss, participation in parallel activities run by Cornwall Health Promotion and perceptions of how helpful the sessions had been. Data were analysed using SPSS software.

Results

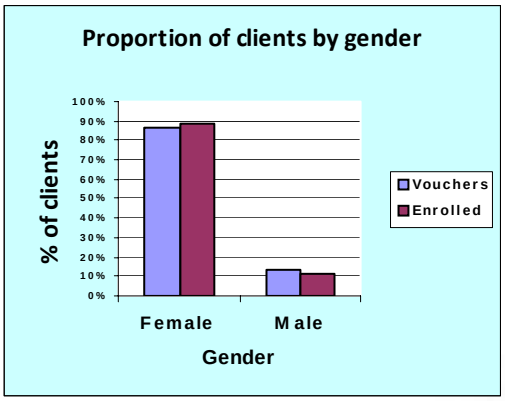
The chart below shows the number of participants and questionnaires completed by April 2008.



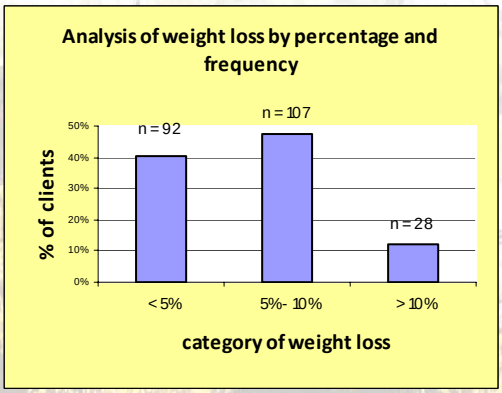
Of those for whom data were available (n=374), 299 (80%) completed the 12 week programme. Younger participants were more likely to exit the programme before completion.

Of those completing the 12 week programme there was an improvement in lifestyle in terms of diet and exercise (self-report). Those reporting a healthy diet rose from 54% to 82%, and those reporting a healthy exercise regime rose from 28% to 39%.

The majority of those receiving vouchers (see chart below) were female (87%, n = 721) with a higher proportion enrolling with Weight Watchers (89%, n = 606). There was good representation across all age bands.



Weight data were recorded for 227 of the 299 who completed the 12 week course. One hundred and thirty-five individuals (59%) achieved at least 5% weight loss over the course of the Weight Watchers programme (see chart below). Overall results were comparable with other referral schemes reported in the UK.



A number of participants also took advantage of other related services, including LEAPActive, a physical activity programme, and Eatsome, a course encouraging cooking for a healthy diet. Generally these participants had higher starting BMI measurements than the overall study population. Two hundred and seventy-five participants (33%) spoke to a support worker employed to provide counselling and encouragement to those on the programme.

Conclusions

- Of those issued with vouchers under the scheme, the majority enrolled onto the Weight Watchers scheme
- The majority of those completing the 12 week course lost at least 5% of body weight
- The majority of those issued with vouchers were female. This proportion rose for those who enrolled
- Younger people were more likely to leave the Weight Watchers course before the end of the 12 weeks
- There was self-reported improvement in lifestyle indicators, i.e. diet and exercise, from those completing the 12 week programme

It is recommended that future research of this kind should include a longer period of follow-up to assess sustained weight loss and changes in lifestyle.