

**Stunkard A & McLaren-Hume M.** The results of treatment for obesity: a review of the literature and report of a series. *Arch. Intern. Med.* 103:79-85, 1959.  
[Depts. Psychiatry and Medicine, Univ. Pennsylvania Sch. Medicine, Philadelphia, PA and Dept. Nutrition, New York Hosp., NY]

This paper was the first to document the ineffectiveness of outpatient treatment for obesity, thereby leading to a more realistic assessment of the problem. A literature review revealed that only 25 percent of patients lost more than 20 pounds and clinic patients fared even less well. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 305 publications since 1961.]

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"This study grew out of an attempt to resolve a paradox—the contrast between my difficulties in treating obesity and the widespread assumption that such treatment was easy and effective. At the time, I was working in Harold Wolff's Psychosomatic Research Group at New York Hospital and at first attributed my difficulties to problems of patient selection. Growing doubts, however, led me to review the literature on outpatient treatment of obesity to see if other people really were doing as well as the current optimism implied. This review revealed serious problems in the reporting of data, including the omission of data on patients who had dropped out of treatment (and who presumably had not done well) and grouping of data so as to obscure the outcome of treatment of individual patients. When subjected to even minimal criteria, the vast literature (even in 1959) on the treatment of obesity shrunk to just eight reports. Alvan Feinstein, who was then working on obesity at the Rockefeller Institute, suggested assessing outcome by listing the percent of

patients in each report who lost 20 and 40 pounds. When this was done, it became clear that the results of outpatient treatment were remarkably similar and remarkably poor. With the exception of Feinstein's own series, only 25 percent of patients lost more than 20 pounds and only five percent lost more than 40 pounds. Furthermore, these reports were all by experts. It seemed likely that patients of the average practitioner fared even less well.

"To find out whether this was, in fact, the case, I enlisted the help of a dietician, Mavis McLaren-Hume, in following the course of 100 consecutive patients referred to the Nutrition Clinic of New York Hospital. This clinic was an ideal resource, since all patients who were treated for obesity in any clinic in the hospital were referred here for a diet, and since their records in these clinics were available for follow-up. These results were, as I had suspected, even worse than those in the literature. Instead of 25 percent, only 12 percent of patients lost 20 pounds, and instead of five percent, only one percent lost 40 pounds. Furthermore, two years later, only two percent of patients had maintained their 20-pound weight loss.

"I believe that this paper has been cited frequently because it documented for the first time the ineffectiveness of outpatient treatment for obesity, and thereby led to a more realistic assessment of the problem and of the means for coping with it. These means are still limited, as Wing and Jeffery have shown in their recent review.<sup>1</sup>

"Soon after the publication of this paper, I received the Annual Award for Research of the American Psychiatric Association.

"*Citation Classics* are particularly valuable in opening a window on the personal origins of research, a topic that is as important as it is poorly understood. Those interested in this area might enjoy *The Pain of Obesity*,<sup>2</sup> which describes similar, more detailed accounts of seven other research efforts. Interestingly, the present study had not seemed worth including."

1. Wing R R & Jeffery R W. Outpatient treatment of obesity: a comparison of methodology and clinical results. *Int. J. Obesity* 3:261-79, 1979.
2. Stunkard A J. *The pain of obesity*. Palo Alto, CA: Bull Publishing, 1976. 236 p.