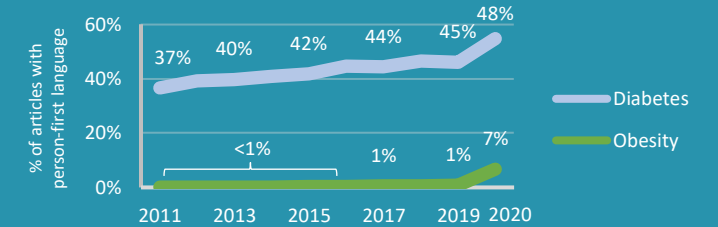# Person-first language in diabetes and obesity scientific publications: Are we making progress?

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Over the past decade, person-first language was used in about half of diabetes-focused articles and fewer than 1% of obesity articles

INTRODUCTION

- The use of condition-first language (eg, diabetic, obese) can negatively influence patient motivation and increase stigmatization.
- Several professional societies endorse using person-first language (eg, person with obesity, person with diabetes) in communication involving people with diabetes or obesity.
- The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which scholarly articles focusing on diabetes or obesity use person-first language.

METHODS

- Person-first and condition-first terms for diabetes and obesity were identified from language guidelines.
- Exact phrase literature searches were conducted with PubMed from 2011-2020 and resulting articles were categorized as person-first, condition-first, or both.
- Articles were limited to those in English, human subjects only, and with abstract text available. Case studies and letters to the editor were excluded.
- Search results were downloaded into EndNote 20 for data extraction and review of titles and abstracts.
- Between group comparisons were made using Chi-square models or Fisher's Exact tests.
- Multivariate analysis was performed with logistic regression using article and journal-specific characteristics (e.g. country of publication).

RESULTS

- The searches yielded 56,048 scholarly articles for diabetes and 45,584 articles for obesity published between 2011 and 2020.
- Among diabetes articles, 42.8% used person-first language, 40.1% used condition-first language, and 17.2% contained both.
- Among obesity articles, 0.5% used person-first language, 99.3% used condition-first language, and 0.2% contained both (P<0.001 vs. diabetes articles).

DIABETES-FOCUSED ARTICLES

- On average, the use of person-first language in diabetes-focused articles increased by 3.1% per year **(Figure 1A)**.
- Diabetes articles were more likely to use person-first language if: 1) they were published in a journal that had a focus on diabetes, 2) the journal had a policy encouraging the use of person-first language, and 3) the article was published more recently.

Figure 1: Proportion of diabetes-focused scholarly articles (A) and obesity-focused articles (B) that used person-first language from 2011-2020
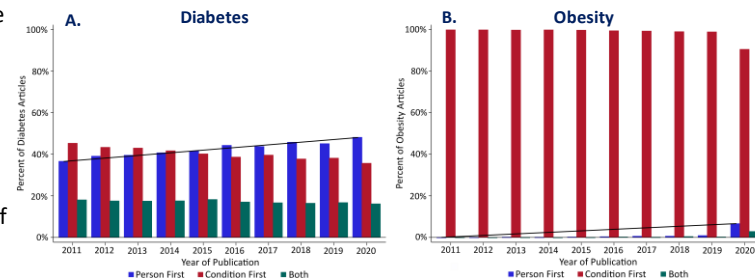
OBESITY-FOCUSED ARTICLES

- 0.1% of obesity-focused articles used person-first language in 2011 compared to 6.6% in 2020 **(Figure 1B)**.
- Obesity articles were more likely to use person-first language if: 1) they were published in a US-based journal, 2) if the journal had a policy encouraging the use of person-first language, and 3) if the article was published more recently

IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY POSITION STATEMENTS

- Person-first language was used more following the publication of professional society position statements that recommend person-first language (2018-2020) than in the years prior (2011-2017; P<0.001).
- However, among diabetes-focused articles, the rate of change in the proportion of articles that used person-first language was not different in 2018-2020 when compared to 2011-2017 (P=0.970).

SCHOLARLY JOURNALS

- The 25 journals that most frequently publish diabetes-focused articles (29.3% of all articles) were more likely to use person-first language when compared to journals with fewer diabetes articles (49.9% vs. 39.8%, respectively; P<0.001)**(Figure 2)**.
- Journals that frequently publish obesity-focused articles (21.6% of all identified obesity articles) were also more likely to publish articles that use person-first language (0·8% vs. 0.4%; P<0.001).

Figure 2: Proportion of diabetes articles that use person-first language among journals that frequently publish diabetes articles
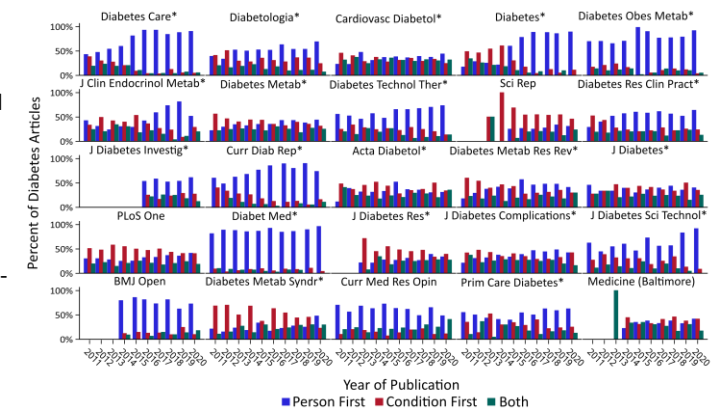
CONCLUSIONS

- While the use of person-first language in diabetes articles has increased over the past ten years, adoption has recently slowed despite the publication of language guidelines and policies.
- Among obesity-focused articles, person-first language is generally not used, suggesting a widespread lack of recognition of its importance within the scientific community.
- Growing evidence supports the value of employing person-first language in clinical settings, and scientific publications set an example for the way health care professionals communicate about people with diabetes and obesity.