



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII JOHN A. BURNS SCHOOL OF MEDICINE MEDICAL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS OBESE PATIENTS

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PURPOSE

To describe third and fourth year University of Hawai'i, John A. Burns School of Medicine medical students' attitudes towards obese patients.

ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that healthcare professionals often demonstrate obesity biases, which in turn reduce the quality of care obese patients receive. The purpose of the current study was to describe third and fourth year University of Hawai'i, John A. Burns School of Medicine medical students' attitudes towards obese patients. Data were collected using questions from a previously validated survey assessing how healthcare providers react and recommend medical care to patients with varying characteristics. The responses of 114 medical students were analyzed. Overall, the majority of students' responses reflected the belief that obesity may be a behavioral issue. There were no statistically significant differences between the third and fourth year students' responses. Important areas of future research include assessing students' awareness of the social determinants of health and their ability to self-identify possible biases in caring for obese patients.

BACKGROUND

- Obesity is a chronic disease that affects more than one-third of the adults living in the United States.¹
- Along with biological and behavioral factors, social determinants of health (socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, social and natural physical environments, access to healthy foods, etc.) are fundamental causes of obesity.^{2,3}
- Many healthcare professionals struggle with treating obesity, and many studies suggest providers can harbor negative attitudes towards obese patients.⁴⁻⁶
- These negative attitudes likely reduce the quality of medical care obese patients receive with respect to effective communication, time allocated, and relationship building.⁷
- In general, medical schools provide minimal hours of nutrition education and obesity teaching⁵ and can be learning environments that do not actively discourage obesity bias.⁸

METHODS

- Data were generated from a pilot study, which included five survey questions from a study by Foster⁴ addressing attitudes towards obese patients.
- Participants: third and fourth year John A. Burns School of Medicine medical students
 - Recruited through email solicitations between June 2014 and July 2015 and completed an anonymous online questionnaire

RESULTS

Study Enrollment

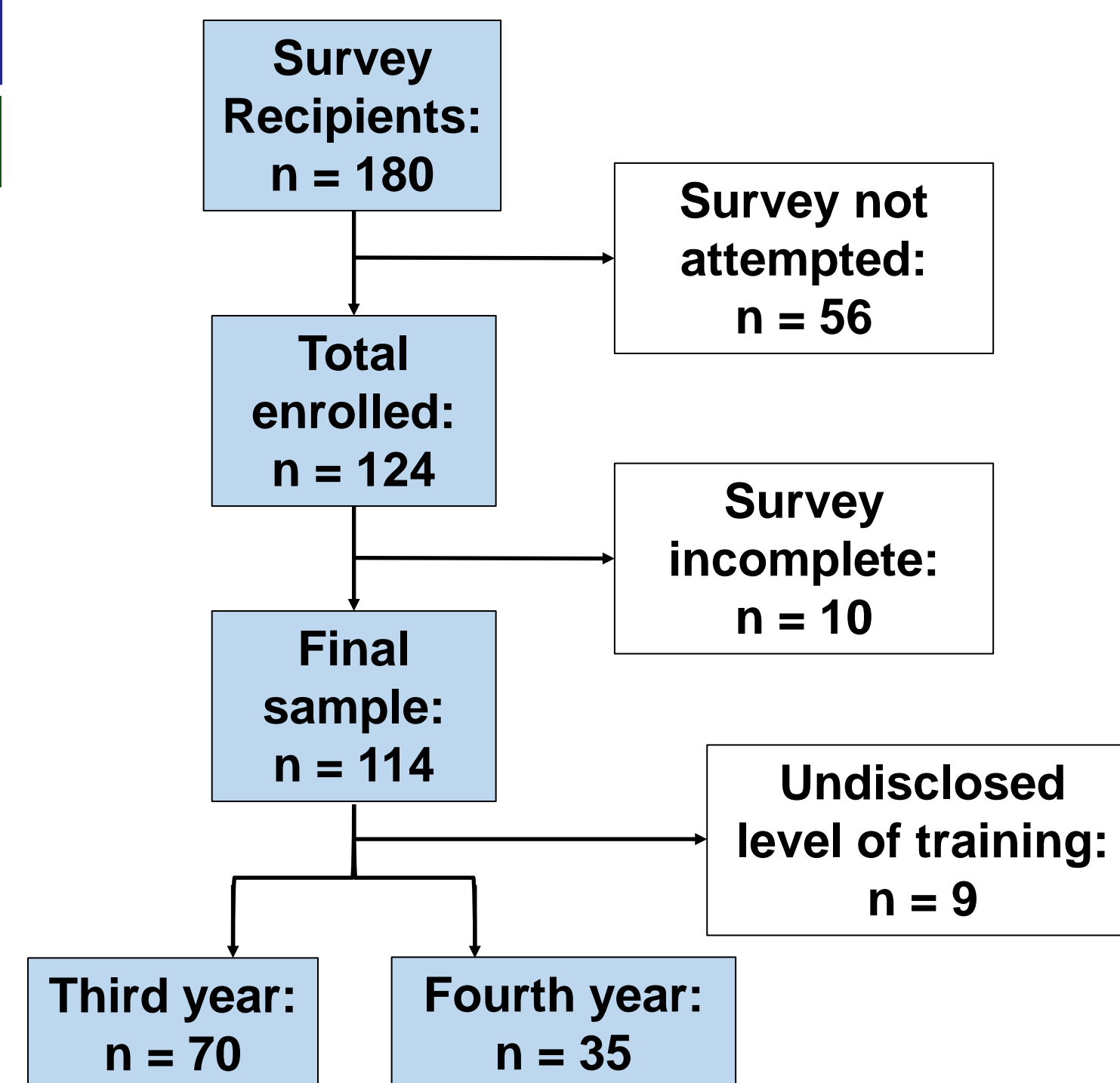


Figure 1. Third and fourth year JABSOM medical students' responses to: *I believe it's necessary to educate obese patients on the health risks of obesity* ($p = 0.40$).

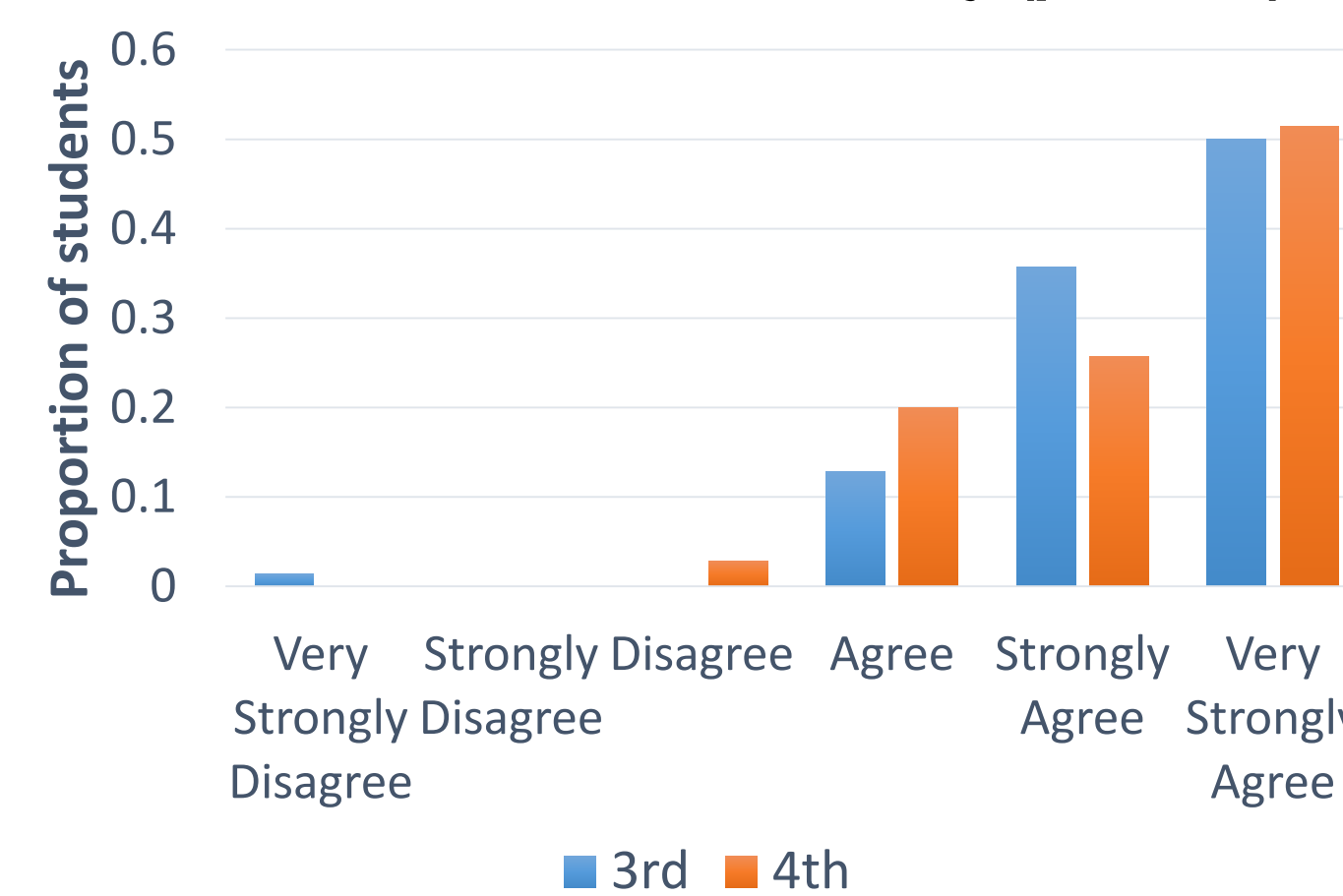


Figure 4. Third and fourth year JABSOM medical students' responses to: *Most obese patients could reach a normal weight if they were motivated to do so* ($p = 0.10$).

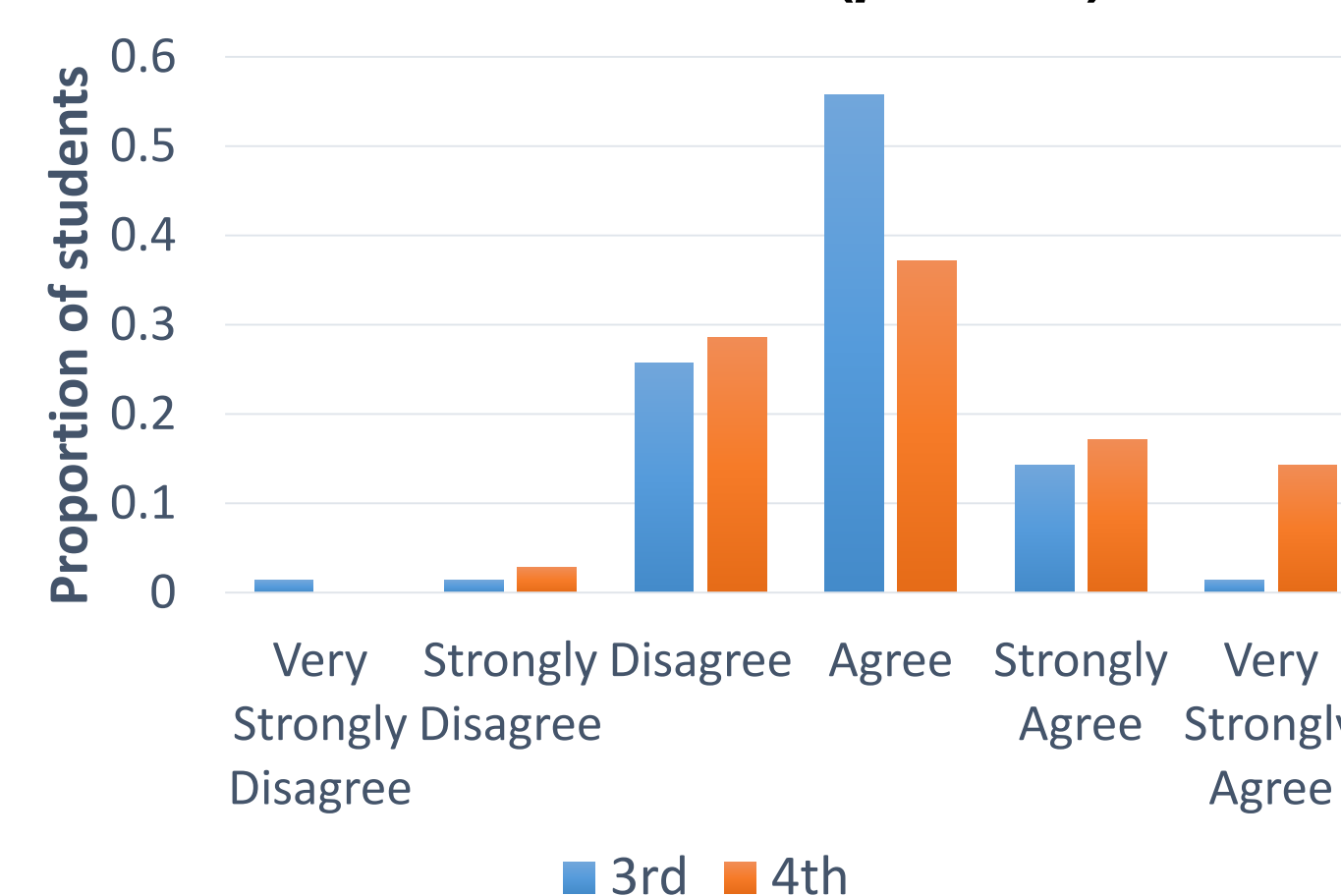


Table 1. Responses of Study Population (n = 114)

Question	Very Strongly Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)	Very Strongly Agree n (%)
I believe it's necessary to educate obese patients on the health risks of obesity.	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	18 (15.8)	36 (31.6)	58 (50.9)
It is difficult for me to feel empathy for an obese patient.	15 (13.2)	39 (34.2)	37 (32.5)	11 (9.6)	9 (7.9)	3 (2.6)
Most obese patients are well aware of the health risks of obesity.	3 (2.6)	12 (10.5)	50 (43.9)	37 (32.5)	11 (9.6)	1 (0.9)
Most obese patients could reach a normal weight (for their height) if they were motivated to do so.	1 (0.9)	3 (2.6)	31 (27.2)	54 (47.4)	19 (16.7)	6 (5.3)
I feel uncomfortable with examining an obese patient.	9 (7.9)	19 (16.7)	53 (46.5)	26 (22.8)	3 (2.6)	4 (3.5)

Figure 2. Third and fourth year JABSOM medical students' responses to: *It is difficult for me to feel empathy for an obese patient* ($p = 0.09$).

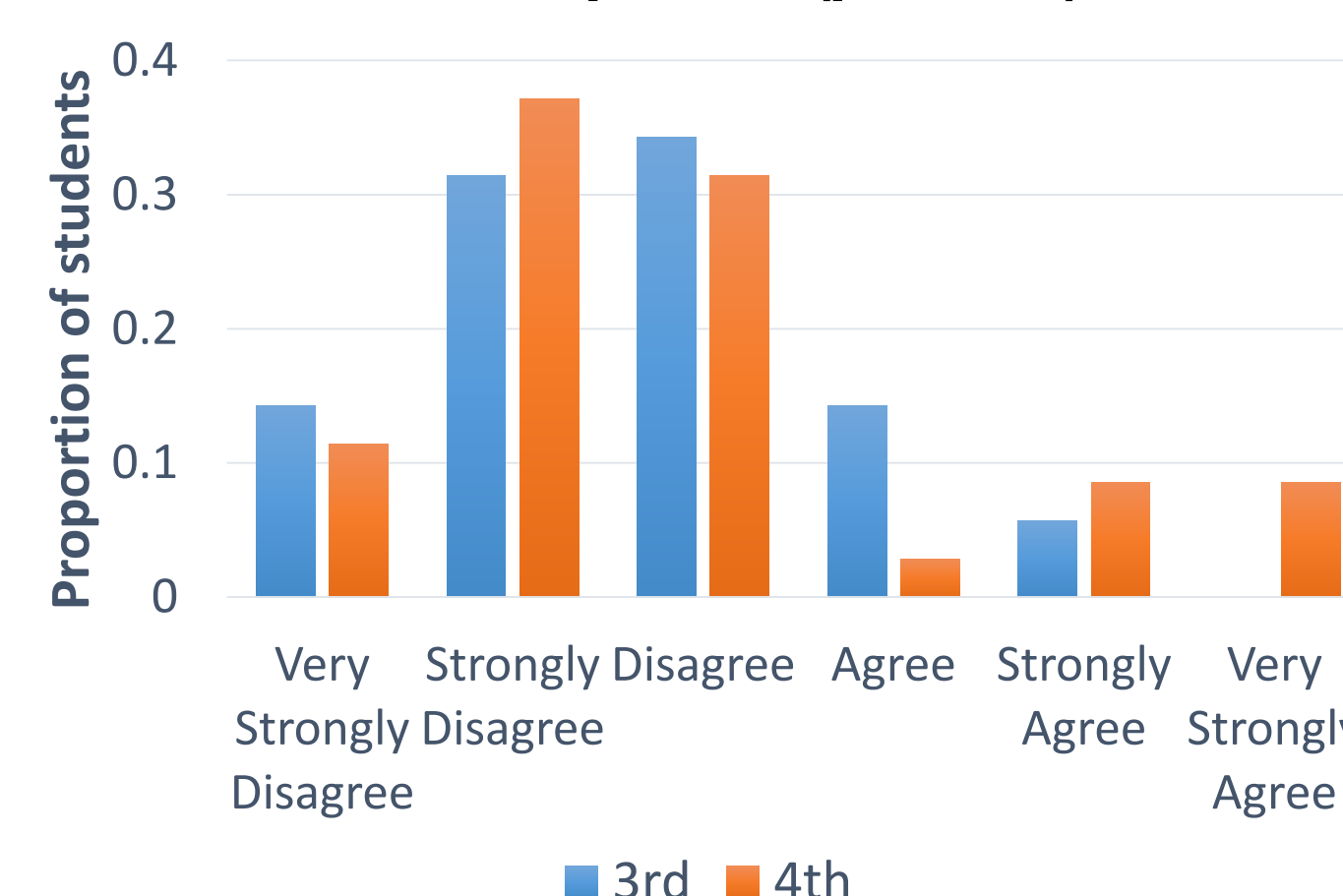


Figure 5. Third and fourth year JABSOM medical students' responses to: *I feel uncomfortable with examining an obese patient* ($p = 0.41$).

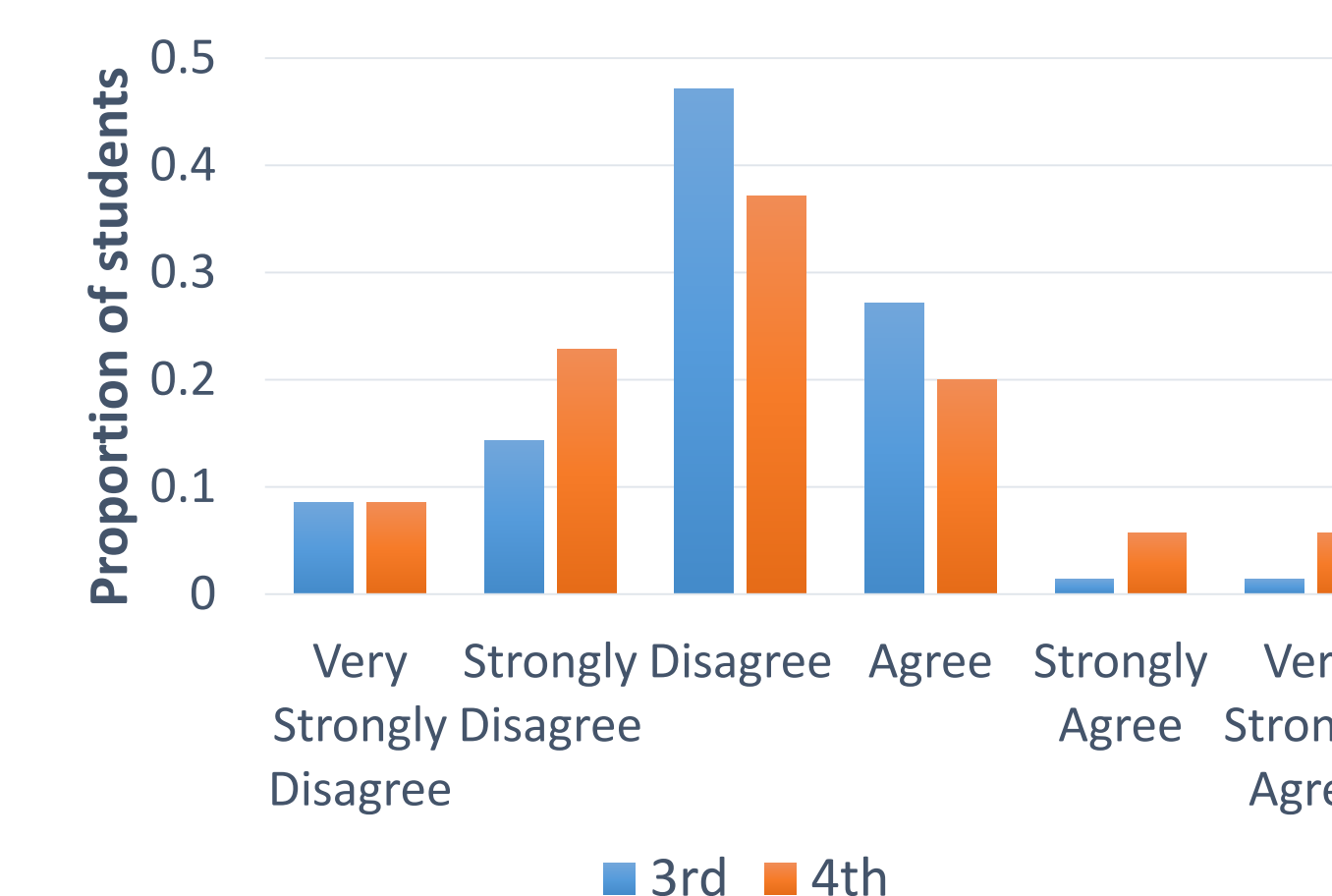
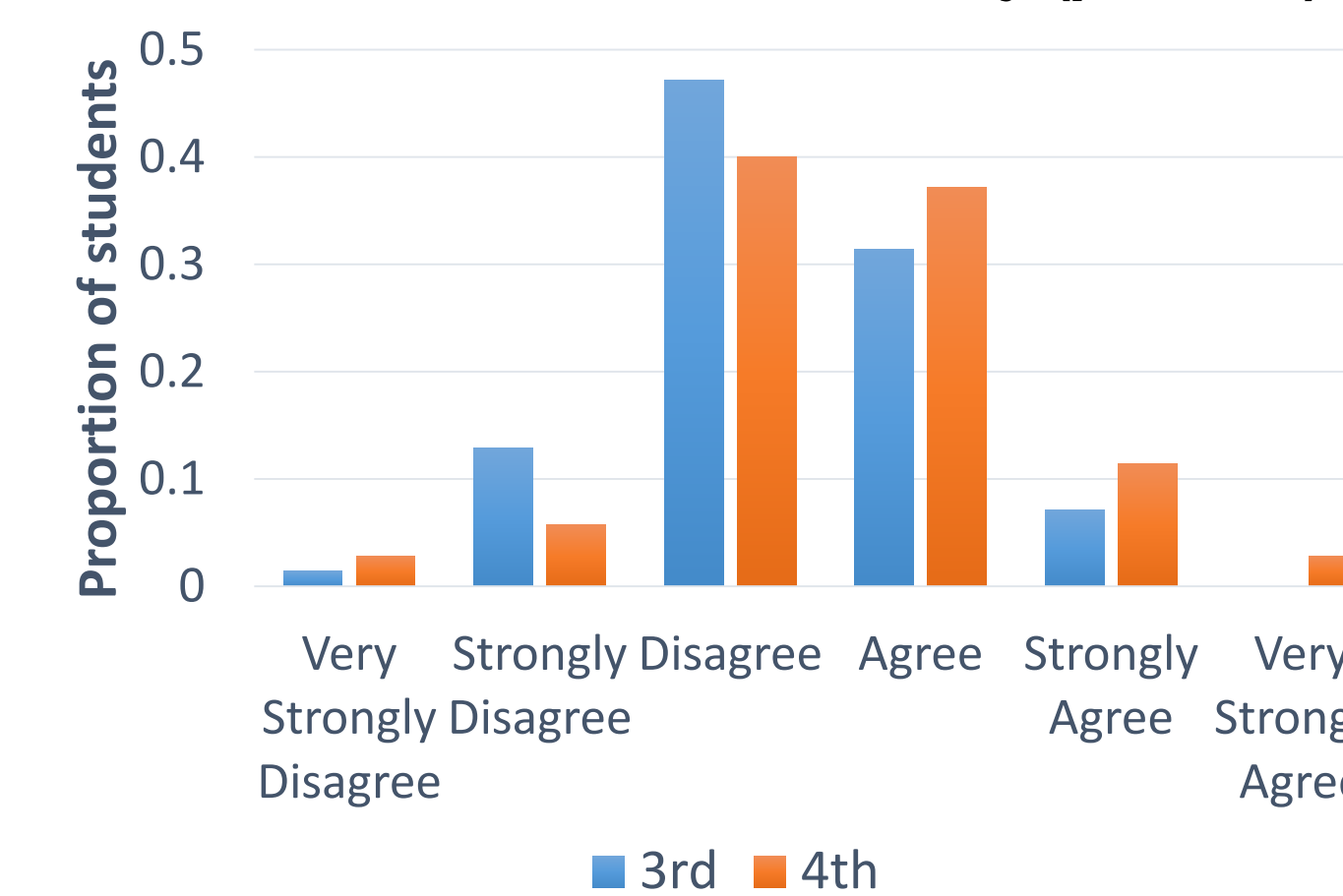


Figure 3. Third and fourth year JABSOM medical students' responses to: *Most obese patients are well aware of the health risks of obesity* ($p = 0.50$).



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LIMITATIONS

- Only five survey questions – limited data were collected for the study
- No flexibility to gather more data on participants' attitudes towards obese patients and on participant demographics
- Sample size was potentially too small
- Low generalizability

DISCUSSION

- Obesity is a complex health care issue that is influenced by biological factors, social determinants of health, and behavioral factors.
- Our results provide a preliminary, though important, view into this complex area.
- Students may associate obesity with a behavioral issue.
 - The majority of students indicated that motivation is a determinant of weight loss.
 - Nearly all supported educating obese patients about the health risks of obesity, but almost half believed that obese patients are already well aware of those risks.
- Education on obesity occurs most heavily during the first two years at John A. Burns School of Medicine – possible cause for lack of statistical difference between third and fourth years
- The results of our study were similar to the results collected from identical questions validated in a study by Foster et al.
- Although limitations prevent us from drawing strong conclusions, attitudes expressed by medical students may be similar to those expressed by physicians in other studies.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Interventions:
 - Increase education on the social determinants of health so that students can better the treatment of obesity and improve relationships with patients
 - Increase students' awareness of their own attitudes towards obese patients
- Future studies are needed to formulate education programs that can be effectively integrated into the medical school curriculum.