

'Obesity isn't treated as an equal disease'



Michael Lacombe and his daughter Meagan, 8, fix a healthy breakfast for the family. Lacombe has lost more than 100 pounds since having gastric bypass surgery in September 2013. GREG LYNCH / STAFF

Officials: Lack of insurance coverage, access prevents weight loss surgery.

By Hannah Poturalski
Staff Writer

The benefits of weight loss surgery extend beyond the shedding of excess pounds to encompass financial, lifestyle and other health-associated advantages.

But still less than 1 percent of patients eligible for weight loss surgeries, including gastric bypass, undergo the procedures each year in the United States, according

to the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery.

Dr. Donovan Teel II, medical director of bariatrics for Premier Health Network, that operates Atrium Medical Center in Middletown, said he and a second physician perform about 400 bariatric surgeries each year. He said the leading reason why only 1 percent of eligible patients undergo the surgeries is "access and insurance coverage."

In-depth coverage

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"Obesity isn't treated as an equal disease; there's a bias against it," Teel said, including companies adding extra co-pays for the procedure.

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Weight loss

continued from A1

Weight loss surgeries are recommended for adults with a body mass index – amount of excessive body fat – of 40 or higher, or those with a BMI of 35 with obesity-related comorbidities such as high cholesterol, sleep apnea and diabetes, according to Dr. Joe Northup, a bariatric surgeon with the Mercy Health network in Fairfield. A normal BMI ranges from 18 to 25.

“Surgery is a declaration you will be successful and live a healthy lifestyle,” Northup said. “Most have already tried different ways to lose weight. Weight loss surgery is a tool to make diet and exercise successful.”

The American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery estimates between 150,000 and 160,000 Americans undergo bariatric surgery each year.

More than a third of U.S. adults are obese, and more than 8 percent of the U.S. population – 25.8 million people – have diabetes. The total cost of diagnosed diabetes in 2012 in the U.S. was \$245 billion, according to the American Diabetes Association.

“Patients are not aware of their BMI and who qualifies for surgery,” Northup said.

Northup and his partner, Dr. Mohamed Dahman, perform about 300 bariatric surgeries each year at Mercy’s Fairfield and Jewish hospitals. Northup said once a person hits a BMI of 40 or higher, it’s very difficult to have “successful sustained weight loss.”

Bariatric surgeries include three types: gastric bypass (creating a small stomach pouch that bypasses the rest of the stomach and a short section of intestine); sleeve gastrectomy (removing a large portion of the stomach to create a small stomach); and adjustable gastric band (creating a narrow area to slow food intake and reduce some hunger).

Weight loss surgeries have the ability to improve or reverse a patient’s comorbidities, including type II diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and arthritis. Northup said type II diabetes is resolved in 85 percent of his patients.

Michael Lacombe, 47, of Hamilton, has lost about 130 pounds since



Michael Lacombe weighed 386 pounds before having gastric bypass surgery in September 2013. His goal is to reach 200 pounds.

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undergoing gastric bypass surgery by Dr. Northup in September 2013. At an original weight of 386 pounds, Lacombe said he’s lost between five and 10 pounds each week. His goal is to reach 200 pounds.

“I went from a high dosage of medications to none within two to three weeks,” Lacombe said. “My energy is up and I owe my life to Dr. Northup.”

Prior to surgery, Lacombe had high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and for the past 11 years, type II diabetes being treated with insulin and pills. He saves about \$300 a month on medications – money he says now “goes to my kids.”

Since having the surgery, Lacombe’s energy levels have increased and he spends more time with his family, wife Jennifer and children Nicholas, 12, and Meagan, 8.

“It’s easier to get out of bed in the morning; I don’t feel the stress on my knees anymore,” Lacombe said. “I can find clothing in my size now.”

Lacombe said through the help of dietitians at Mercy Health he’s been able to make significant changes to his diet, including eating lots of green vegetables and cutting out hamburgers and two two-liter bottles of soda each night.

“You don’t have those urges anymore; I force myself to eat because I’m not hungry,” Lacombe said. “The hardest thing has been not eating hamburgers.”

Dr. Angela Fitch, medical director of medical weight loss programs at the UC Health Weight Loss Center in West Chester Twp., said in order for weight loss surgery to be successful, the patient still has to follow lifestyle recommendations, including 150 minutes of physical activity per week and eating 60 to 90 grams of protein each day.