Dear Prime Minister

We were delighted to read your comments about the need for a more robust approach to tackling obesity during the current pandemic. Emerging data suggest that people with obesity develop more severe COVID-19 coupled with a higher mortality rate (58% in patients with a BMI ≥40). A similar association between obesity and poor outcome was observed with SARS.

To save lives and protect the NHS it is essential we have a healthier population with a lower prevalence of obesity. Bariatric surgery, recognised by NICE as one of the most cost-effective healthcare interventions, is often viewed as a ‘quick-fix’ solution, but we need to look beyond this stereotype because a quick-fix is precisely what is needed if we are to avoid needless suffering, ICU admission and death in patients with obesity who subsequently become infected with SARS-CoV-2.

Bariatric surgery engenders beneficial improvements in type 2 diabetes within days of surgery, significant weight loss within 12 weeks and ongoing continued health improvements including remission of type 2 diabetes in 70% of patients, reduction in the number of heart attacks and strokes and increased life expectancy. Unfortunately, failure to commission appropriate services for people with obesity, due to funding constraints and poor appreciation of the health benefits of bariatric surgery, has resulted in the UK having one of the lowest rates of bariatric surgery in Europe (6,000 pa versus 60,000 in France). As a consequence the majority of people living with severe obesity have been denied access to this life saving surgery.

There is now an urgent need for the NHS to deploy a rapidly effective treatment for severe obesity, so that we can move as many people out of harm’s way should they contract the virus. The glimmer of hope for the at-risk patient with obesity and/or diabetes is bariatric surgery. It is by far the most effective treatment for obesity that we have in the fight against the suffering and death being wreaked by COVID-19 in this group of patients.

Obesity is not simply a lifestyle choice. There is strong scientific evidence showing that the drivers of obesity are complex, with up to 70% of a person’s body weight being determined by an interaction between their genes and our current environment. Indeed, the Royal College of Physicians in January 2019 called upon the Government to urgently recognise obesity as a disease to enable patients access to the treatment they need and to reduce the stigma that people living with obesity face on a daily basis. There has been a curious reluctance on the part of the NHS to grasp this particular nettle.
We would welcome your support in pushing for prioritisation of effective NICE-approved treatments for obesity and in particular bariatric surgery during the forthcoming NHS restart, along with rapid expansion of the number of procedures commissioned. BOMSS believes that as a minimum the UK should be carrying out 20,000 bariatric procedures pa and that we have the manpower and infrastructure to deliver this. There will also need to be a parallel increase in support for Tier 3 (medical weight management) services, one role of which is to prepare patients for surgery.

We would be delighted to assist you in any way to secure your goal of improving the health of the British people afflicted by the dual modern curses of obesity and COVID-19.

Yours sincerely

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Footnote:

BOMSS is a multispecialty group of surgeons, academics, dieticians, psychologists, nurses and physicians dedicated to the development of safe bariatric surgery. Our national database is the envy of similar international societies and shows that here in the UK we deliver some of the best surgical results in the world, with low complication rates and a perioperative mortality that is considerably less than that of hip or knee replacements. The UK leads global research efforts in understanding how body weight is regulated and the mechanisms by which bariatric surgery mediates its beneficial effects.