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1. Introduction to the Obesity Community Fund

The Obesity Community Fund is a patient-led non-profit organisation established to improve access to evidence-based obesity treatment in South Africa. The Fund works alongside healthcare professionals, patient advocates and corporate partners to mobilise resources, support education and make treatment pathways more accessible for individuals living with obesity.

Obesity is a chronic disease that affects more than 20 million South Africans and contributes significantly to the burden of conditions such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and sleep apnoea. Despite the scale of the problem, access to effective treatment remains extremely limited. Bariatric surgery is internationally recognised as one of the most effective treatments for severe obesity and related metabolic disease, yet fewer than 0.03 percent of South Africans currently have access to this treatment.

The Obesity Community Fund was created to address this gap. The organisation focuses on advocacy, education, and the development of sustainable funding models that allow more people to access appropriate treatment.

2. Our mission

The mission of the Obesity Community Fund is to mobilise resources, raise awareness and provide access to affordable and comprehensive obesity care. Through collaboration with healthcare professionals, patients and partners, the Fund seeks to empower individuals and communities to overcome the challenges of obesity and metabolic disease.

In addition to supporting individual patients, the Fund also invests in public education to reduce stigma, training initiatives for healthcare professionals, research to improve treatment outcomes, and advocacy efforts to strengthen access to obesity care within the healthcare system.

3. Why access to treatment is limited and how we overcome it with the Fund

Bariatric surgery is a life-changing medical treatment for people living with severe obesity. However, the cost of surgery places it out of reach for many patients.

In South Africa, the cost of bariatric surgery for private patients paying cash typically ranges between R110 000 and R180 000 depending on the procedure and the clinical needs of the patient.

While some medical aid schemes provide partial cover for bariatric surgery, patients are often responsible for significant co-payments. These co-payments typically range between R40 000 and R80 000 depending on the medical aid scheme and the surgical procedure required.

Many patients therefore find themselves medically eligible for surgery but financially unable to proceed.

The purpose of the Obesity Community Fund is to help bridge this gap by developing sustainable funding mechanisms that make treatment more accessible over time.

4. Why the Fund uses a membership funding model

The Obesity Community Fund operates on a membership-based funding model designed to create a sustainable pool of resources that can assist members over time.

The model is built on the principle of collective contribution. Members contribute to the Fund through structured monthly payments. These contributions are combined with donations, sponsorship and in-kind support to expand the number of patients who can access treatment.

It is important to understand that the Fund does not provide free surgery. Instead, it uses member contributions together with sponsorship, discounted professional services and donated equipment to reduce the financial barriers that prevent many patients from accessing treatment.

As more members join and more partners contribute, the Fund's ability to support patients and expand obesity care initiatives increases.

5. The funding model

The Obesity Community Fund raises resources through several complementary channels.

Member contributions form the foundation of the funding model. Members contribute monthly to the Fund, which helps build the financial base needed to support access to surgery and related initiatives.

The Fund also receives donations from individuals who wish to support the mission of improving access to obesity care.

Corporate sponsors contribute through financial support and through sponsorship of medical equipment required for surgical procedures.

The Fund partners with healthcare professionals who donate their time or provide services at reduced rates. Surgeons, physicians, dietitians and other specialists often contribute professional expertise on a pro bono basis or at discounted fees to help reduce the cost of treatment.

In addition to financial contributions, the Fund welcomes in-kind donations. These may include medical equipment, professional expertise, training resources, research support or other forms of assistance that strengthen the initiative.

6. Membership and financial commitment

Individuals who wish to participate in the Obesity Community Fund may apply for membership.

Members contribute R500 per month for a period of sixty months. These contributions support the activities of the non-profit organisation and contribute to the funding pool used to improve access to treatment and support the Fund's broader mission.

When a member is approved for surgery, an additional non-refundable administration fee of R10 000 is payable to support the operational coordination of the procedure and the surrounding processes.

Members should note that these contributions are not refundable and remain payable for the full duration of the agreed contribution period, regardless of whether the member is ultimately selected for surgery.

Membership does not guarantee surgery. Membership allows individuals to participate in the funding model and to be considered for surgery through the Fund as resources and medical capacity become available.

7. Members with medical aid

Patients who have medical aid may also join the Obesity Community Fund.

Medical aid schemes sometimes cover a portion of bariatric surgery costs, but many patients remain responsible for significant co-payments. These co-payments typically range between R40 000 and R80 000 depending on the medical aid scheme and the surgical procedure required.

Membership of the Fund may assist these patients by helping reduce or manage these co-payments through the Fund's partnerships and funding support.

Members who have medical aid therefore benefit from being part of the Fund while still making use of their medical aid benefits.

8. Membership numbers and the patient list

When a member joins the Obesity Community Fund, they receive a membership number.

This membership number determines the member's position on the patient list maintained by the Fund.

The Fund operates on a first join, first served principle. Members who join earlier are placed earlier on the patient list.

As funding becomes available and surgical capacity allows, members are considered for surgery according to their position on this list.

This approach ensures fairness, transparency and clarity in how surgical opportunities are allocated.

9. Medical evaluation and eligibility

All medical decisions are made by qualified healthcare professionals.

When a member reaches the appropriate position on the patient list and resources are available, the member will undergo a clinical assessment by the multidisciplinary medical team.

All medical protocols and treatment pathways follow the recognised National Obesity Management Guidelines and the clinical standards of the South African Metabolic Medicine and Surgery Society (SAMMSS).

The medical team determines eligibility for surgery based on clinical criteria. The decision of the medical team is final and based entirely on medical considerations.

10. What the Obesity Community Fund does

- ✓ The Obesity Community Fund mobilises financial and professional resources to improve access to obesity treatment.
- ✓ The Fund raises and manages financial contributions from members, donors and sponsors to support members in accessing bariatric surgery and related treatment pathways.
- ✓ The Fund partners with medical professionals who contribute their time and expertise to the initiative, often on a pro bono basis or at reduced rates.
- ✓ The Fund collaborates with corporate partners who sponsor medical equipment and other surgical resources required for procedures.
- ✓ The Fund invests resources in public education, professional training, research and advocacy initiatives aimed at improving access to obesity care.

11. What the Obesity Community Fund does not do

- The Obesity Community Fund does not provide free surgery.
- The Fund does not guarantee surgery for any member.
- The Fund does not provide medical treatment or make medical decisions. All clinical decisions are the responsibility of the healthcare professionals involved in the patient's treatment.
- The Fund does not cover all medical costs associated with bariatric surgery.
- The Fund does not take responsibility for the lifestyle changes required for successful long-term treatment outcomes.

12. Volunteer governance and operations

The Obesity Community Fund is managed entirely by volunteers.

The organisation does not employ full-time staff. All governance, administration, fundraising, communication and programme coordination activities are carried out by individuals who volunteer their time and expertise.

Because the organisation operates on a volunteer basis, response times for enquiries and applications may vary depending on volunteer availability.

This structure allows the Fund to minimise administrative costs and direct the majority of financial resources toward programmes and patient support.

13. Transparency and ethical principles

The Obesity Community Fund is committed to operating with transparency, fairness and accountability. The Fund's allocation of surgical opportunities follows a clear first join, first served principle based on membership numbers. Financial contributions are used to support the mission of improving access to treatment and advancing the broader objectives of the organisation.

14. Member participation and responsibilities

Membership in the Obesity Community Fund requires active participation from members. This includes their membership fee contribution, advocacy and lobbying, educating themselves and others, and assisting as a volunteer.

Members must provide accurate information when applying and must supply the documentation required for evaluation.

Members must provide permission for the Fund to share aspects of their journey for educational and advocacy purposes, which may include written stories, interviews, photographs and before-and-after images.

Members also accept responsibility for their own treatment journey, including completing required medical assessments, following clinical advice and participating in follow-up care and long-term lifestyle changes.

15. Application process

The process for becoming a member of the Obesity Community Fund follows several steps.

1. The first step is submission of the membership application form together with the required supporting documentation.
2. The second step is the commencement of the monthly membership contribution.
3. Once the application has been processed, the member receives a membership number and is placed on the patient list according to the date of joining.
4. As funding and surgical capacity become available, members are considered for clinical evaluation by the medical team.

16. Legal and administrative conditions

By submitting an application and becoming a member, individuals consent to the collection, storage and processing of personal information by the Obesity Community Fund in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act and the Promotion of Access to Information Act.

Members acknowledge that the Obesity Community Fund provides financial assistance mechanisms but does not provide medical treatment directly. Medical decisions and procedures remain the responsibility of the healthcare professionals involved in the patient's care.

The Fund and its volunteers cannot be held responsible for medical outcomes or complications related to surgical procedures.

17. Moving forward together

The Obesity Community Fund exists to create new opportunities for individuals living with obesity to access evidence-based treatment.

Through collective contributions, professional partnerships and responsible governance, the Fund aims to build a sustainable pathway that expands access to life-changing care.

By becoming a member, individuals contribute not only to their own health journey but also to a broader movement that seeks to improve the way obesity is treated and understood in South Africa.

For more information, visit our website www.obesitycommunityfund.co.za.