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Social environments influencing obesity in Israel - A qualitative study among health workers focusing on three ethno-religious groups

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The prevalence of overweight or obesity in Israel is 60% and 30% for adults and children respectively and this burden is higher among ethnic minorities. Cultural beliefs, practices and levels of acculturation contribute to ethnic disparities in obesity. This qualitative study identifies cultural determinants of obesity by studying the social environments among three population groups in Israel: Ultra-orthodox Jews, settled Muslim Arabs and Ethiopian Jews, the latter two being ethnic minorities in the country. The study was conducted at the Israel Ministry of Health in Jerusalem. Nine healthcare experts from varying professional and ethno-religious backgrounds were interviewed using a semi-structured interviewing technique. The data describing different social environments influencing obesity in Israel were divided into six primary themes. This was

further broken down to secondary and tertiary themes within each of these three populations. The influence of Westernization on lifestyle practices and eating habits among Ethiopian Jews and Muslim Arabs was identified as one of the primary themes. Haredi Jews on the other hand practice traditionalism. Norms such as “fatness as a sign of affluence” was prevalent in the Ethiopian culture and is seen as obesogenic health behaviour. Additionally, psychosocial stressors arising from low socio-economic status (SES) in both the minority groups are viewed as a barrier in making healthy life choices. Socio-cultural norms pose an increased burden of obesity among the Ethiopian Jews and the settled Arabs who are both ethnic minorities in Israel. This dictates the need for targeted population-based interventions to address obesity in these populations.