Patients who lose weight

Anyone who is overweight is likely to be warned of the risk of cardiovascular disease and advised to slim. But what of those patients who come to their doctors complaining of losing weight? Experience suggests that involuntary weight loss is a sign of ill health, and recent publications seem to support this view. Normal people tend to gain weight in early adulthood, reaching a plateau in about the fourth decade.\(^1\)\(^2\) The relative weight of an individual (the ratio of his weight to the population mean, expressed as a percentage) should not fall substantially at any stage. Large epidemiological studies show that mortality is lowest in patients with a relative weight of 100% to 115% of the mean,\(^3\)\(^4\) but it is higher in groups above and below this weight, giving a U-shaped curve of mortality versus relative weight. Cardiovascular disease is often the cause of death in the people with high weights, while cancer and other causes predominate in those whose weights are low.

A recent study of the diagnostic and prognostic significance of involuntary weight loss is therefore of interest.\(^5\) Half of the patients who complained of losing weight had not in fact lost any when weighed carefully. In 35% of those who had actual loss of weight no physical cause was found. Nevertheless, most of the 91 patients with confirmed loss of weight did have a serious underlying disorder: 59 had physical disease and eight had a psychiatric disorder. Twenty-one of the patients with physical disease died within two years.

The diagnoses were not obscure; indeed, most were indicated by the medical history, physical examination, and results of screening laboratory tests and radiological examination.