Weight Loss Undercover: A Secret Shopper Investigation of Weight Loss Medication Prescribing and Management in Medical Spas in Los Angeles and Orange Counties

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INTRODUCTION

New Weight Loss Medications: The innovation of Glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists, such as Wegovy, and Glucose-Dependent Insulinotropic Polypeptide and Glucagon-like Peptide-1 (GIP/GLP-1) receptor agonists, such as Zepbound, have revolutionized the treatment of obesity and weight management.[1] Weekly semaglutide combined with lifestyle interventions resulted in clinically significant weight reduction in overweight or obese individuals.[2] Tirzepatide demonstrated superior efficacy, with non-diabetic patients experiencing a 10% weight reduction with semaglutide and a 17% reduction with tirzepatide over 12 months.[3]

Popularity Leads to Drug Shortage: The rising demand for these medications has been driven by social media and celebrity influence, reflected by the surge of Google searches for GLP-1 agonists.[4] This increase in demand has led to significant shortages, placing semaglutide and tirzepatide on the FDA Drug Shortages List.[5] When a medication is listed as in shortage, certain federal restrictions on compounding are temporarily lifted, allowing compounding pharmacies to produce alternative versions to meet demand.[6]

Compounded Medications in Non-Traditional Care Models: Compounded versions of these medications are increasingly being used in medical spas for aesthetic purposes and off-label prescribing to achieve weight loss.[6] Despite the increasing use of compounded GLP-1 receptor agonists and GIP/GLP-1 dual agonists in medical spas, little is known about how these medications are prescribed and managed in these settings.

OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the availability, prescribing, associated costs, and management of weight loss medications in medical spas across Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

METHODS

Study Design:
- Secret shopper design

Study Population & Site Selection:
- Medical spas in Los Angeles and Orange County
- Identified using Yelp and Google searches
- First 100 sites from search results were selected for contact
- Inclusion criteria: Medical spas that responded, reported providing weight loss medications, and agreed to discuss weight loss treatments over the phone

Data Collection:
- Developed a standardized script with a standard persona
- Jessica Anderson, a 34-year-old female, weighing 170 lbs with a height of 5'4", resulting in a BMI of 28 (overweight)
- Data collected regarding medication availability, prescribing practices, source of medications, costs, testing requirements, oversight, and other patient supportive services
- Calls were conducted between October 2024 – January 2025

Data Analysis:
- Descriptive analysis was conducted to summarize findings

RESULTS

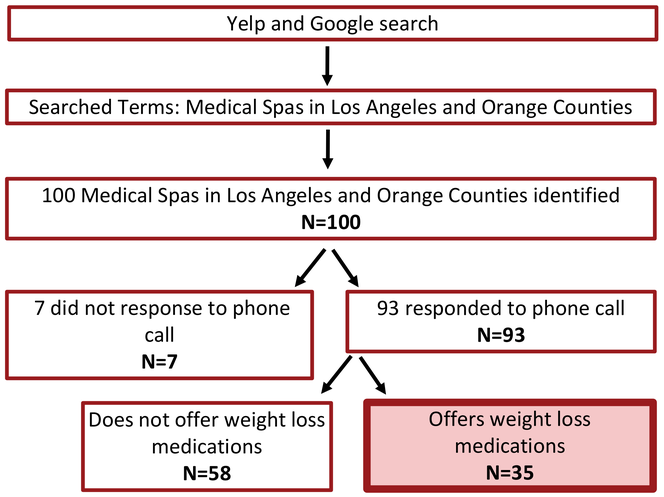
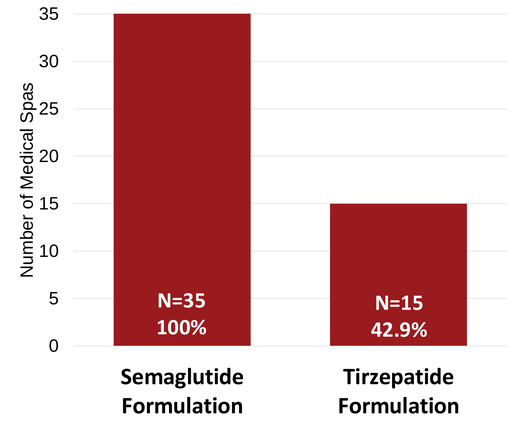


Figure 1: Medical Spa Site Selection

	Compounded Semaglutide (N=35)	Compounded Tirzepatide (N=15)
Monthly Cost Range	$199 to $650	$699 to $1000
Average Monthly Cost	$474.55	$853.7
Medical Spas Offering First Month Discounts	Offered: 10 (28.6%) Not Offered: 25 (71.4%)	Offered: 6 (40%) Not Offered: 9 (60%)
Average First Month Cost	$437.4	$824.5
Average Cost for Subsequent Months	$511.7*	$882.9
Medical Spas Offering Dose Dependent Pricing	Offered: 7 (20%)* Not Offered: 28 (80%)	Offered: 0 (0%) Not Offered: 15 (100%)

*The range of dose-dependent price increases for semaglutide was $25 to $75 per dose increase.

Table 1: Cost and Pricing Structures



1. All 35 medical spas offered compounded formulations, while 3 also provided prescriptions for commercially available products based on patient eligibility.

Figure 2: Types of Weight Loss Medications Available at Medical Spas

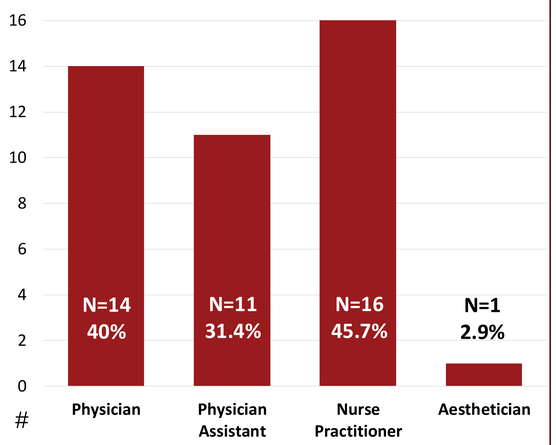
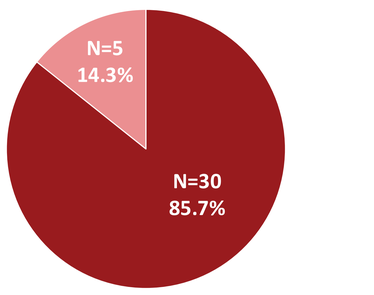


Figure 3: Healthcare Provider Oversight



1. Of the five medical spas that charged a consultation fee, three offered insurance coverage based on eligibility.
2. The one-time consultation fees ranged from $100 to $250.

Figure 4: Initial Visit Consultation Fee

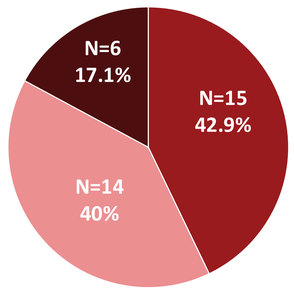


Figure 5: Laboratory Monitoring

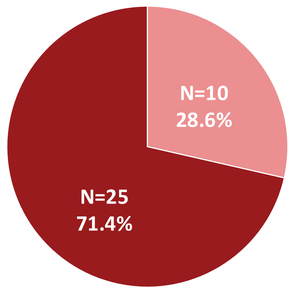


Figure 6: Diet and Exercise Plan

DISCUSSION

Availability: Among the medical spas contacted by secret shoppers, 37.6% reported offering at least one weight loss medication **[Figure 1]**. Semaglutide was more readily available than tirzepatide **[Figure 2].** Despite tirzepatide's relative superiority for weight loss,[3] it was less available in medical spas, possibly due to higher costs or newer market presence.

Cost: Complimentary consultations were offered at 85.7% of sites **[Figure 4].** Despite being less expensive, compounded products available at medical spas still carried high and variable out-of-pocket costs. Average monthly costs for compounded semaglutide and tirzepatide were $474.55 and $853.70, respectively—lower than list prices for Wegovy ($1,349.04)[7] and Zepbound ($1,086.39)[8] if sold without insurance coverage **[Table 1].** First month discounts were common (28.6% of semaglutide, 40% of tirzepatide) **[Table 1].** Dose-based pricing was provided for semaglutide at 20% of sites, in contrast to standard insurance copays, which are typically fixed regardless of dose. Overall, despite cost reductions, these treatments remain financially inaccessible for many.

Oversight, Monitoring, and Patient Support: Most sites (97.1%) reported direct health care provider oversight of patient care **[Figure 3].** One site relied on an aesthetician, with a physician available as needed. Laboratory testing was required or conditionally recommended by 60% of sites, usually at baseline or within the past three months **[Figure 5**]. However, 40% did not require any pre-treatment labs, which raises concerns about safety. While these medications are most effective when paired with lifestyle modifications, only 28.6% of sites offered structured support, indicating a focus on medication administration over comprehensive weight management **[Figure 6].**

Limitations: The study had a small sample size and relied on information from non-clinical staff, without further verification of the reported practices. Geographic limitations, site variability, and lack of patient outcome data further limits generalizability.

CONCLUSION

Compounded semaglutide and tirzepatide are increasingly available at medical spas, expanding patient access to weight loss treatments. However, high out-of-pocket costs remain a significant barrier for many patients. While most sites report healthcare provider oversight, inconsistencies in patient monitoring raise concerns about care quality and safety. As FDA shortages resolve, it remains unclear whether the current access levels will be affected by changes in regulation or supply.

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