

Commentary

Expanding Roles and Opportunities for Dietetics Practitioners in Diabetes Prevention and Care: Reflection on the Past, Speculation for the Future

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The evolution and expansion of roles for dietetics practitioners in diabetes care continues to unfold. This editorial reflects on the role of registered dietitians (RDs) in diabetes care and in advancing medical nutrition therapy (MNT). To speculate on the future, current roles held by RDs in diabetes care are dovetailed with trends influencing dietetic practice and society. Readers are provided with strategies to prepare and position themselves for successful careers.

REFLECTING ON THE ROOTS OF DIETETIC PRACTICE IN DIABETES CARE

RDs have played pivotal roles in studies, events, and professional activities to advance dietetics practice in diabetes care. A few examples among many include: The Institute of Medicine's 1999 landmark recommendation that Medicare reimburse MNT for people with diabetes (1). The National Institutes of Health Diabetes Control and Complications Trial and the Diabetes Prevention Program recognized the effectiveness of nutrition counseling to achieve metabolic goals (2,3). Recently the Diabetes Care and Education dietetic practice group and the American Dietetic Association established Nutrition Practice Guidelines for type 1 diabetes, type 2 diabetes, and gestational diabetes (4), and Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance for diabetes care (5).

RDs specializing in diabetes care began functioning as diabetes educators, leading them into diabetes care beyond MNT several decades ago. In 1977, the National Institutes of Health initiated funding of Diabetes Re-

search and Training Centers to implement a client-centered model for diabetes management. This team approach integrated RDs into all aspects of diabetes care (6). Today RDs may deliver diabetes self-management education under the National Standards for Diabetes Self-Management Education (7). Dietetics practitioners who become Medicare providers and establish a Diabetes Self-Management Education program can be directly reimbursed for this service as well as MNT (8).

SPECULATING ON THE FUTURE

The 2006 Environmental Scan conducted by Leading Futurists, LLC, for the American Dietetic Association indicated members are concerned about managing new challenges, such as a "live for today" consumer attitude; increasing multiculturalism in the United States; economic, environmental, and policy influences on health; and the global communication explosion (9). In 2007, the Phase II Future Practice Education Task Force reported that wellness and prevention services will dominate over illness-related services, and the trend toward more food being consumed away from home will provide roles for RDs with culinary expertise (10).

RDs in diabetes care have expanded their roles to meet societal changes, utilizing skills that include adaptability and flexibility. Online interviews explored the career evolution of RDs currently practicing in expanded roles and diverse settings (11). Their roles and responsibilities evolved into four themes: 1) educator; 2) contributor to community health; 3) policy maker; and 4) telecommunications specialist. These RDs primarily identified critical and strategic thinking, leadership, and communication skills as critical to their role expansion.

PREPARING AND POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS IN DIABETES CARE

Dietetics practitioners should prepare and position themselves now as follows:

- Do personal strategic planning: Just like associations and organizations do strategic planning, dietetics practitioners should conduct personal strategic planning.
- Observe trends and changes in management: Continually read consumer and trade association trend surveys. Review new medications, technologies, and modes of care delivery.
- Consider career advancement: Become knowledgeable about the expanded role of RDs in diabetes care and opportunities for advanced credentials. Be well versed

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STATEMENT OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST: See page S5.

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Manuscript accepted: December 12, 2007.

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0002-8223/08/10804-1012\$34.00/0

doi: 10.1016/j.jada.2008.01.025

in documents that support practice (5,7). Consider attaining and maintaining advanced credentials.

- Pursue professional development: RDs can capitalize on their adaptable and flexible traits as they continually assess their careers and professional learning needs in pursuit of life-long learning.
- Volunteer to network, be mentored, and contribute: Offer time and talent to dietetics and diabetes organizations. These are opportunities to network with committed peers, seek out mentors, be a mentee, explore employment and career opportunities, and strengthen professionalism.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the roots of the dietetics professional and the development of the expertise in diabetes care along with the exponential rise in the number of people with diabetes allows one to expect strong future growth. Speculating on the future provides an opportunity for dietetics professionals to recognize the existing and expansive opportunities. To exploit these opportunities, RDs should stay abreast of trends, pursue continuing education, and become engaged with their colleagues.

STATEMENT OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors have no conflict of interest to report with the sponsor of this supplement article or products discussed in this article.

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