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ABSTRACT

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What is the difference between a Dietitian and a Nutritionist?

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The differences between a Registered Dietitian (RD) and a Nutritionist are very different and it is important for physicians to recognize and understand those differences. The Registered Dietitian is the only medical professional with extensive and specific training in the field of nutrition and has been recognized as such by the Institutes of Medicine and the American Dietetic Association. The RD works closely with physicians to provide evidence based scientific information to members of a community and is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of all members of that community. It is important that physicians are made aware of the valuable asset that dietitians are to the medical community and that they inform their patients of where to go to speak to the leading nutrition professional, the Registered Dietitian. A patient comes to your office and after a thorough checkup with labs is found to have high cholesterol, hypertension and obesity. After discussing the patient's relevant results and findings you decide on any further necessary testing and the appropriate medications to administer. As you are getting ready to write the prescriptions for your patient, she asks you "Should I change my diet with this diagnosis and if so, how?" Sound familiar? The area of nutrition is highly scientific and specialized and there is a profession that is well trained in this field. This is the perfect opportunity to tell your patient about planning a visit with a Registered Dietitian.

Registered Dietitians (RD) are nutrition professionals who work with physicians to individually tailor nutrition therapy for patients and also to relay sound nutrition information to the public. Those who work in the profession, support the same goals that physicians do when it comes to public health, safety and wellbeing. In addition RD's are trained to use only evidence based practices in order to provide the most up-to-date and scientific advice. A Registered Dietitian is educated by an accredited four-year college in the field of food and nutrition and must complete an accredited internship.

Dietitians are educated in areas ranging from disease processes to food management and food properties. Classes a nutrition student may take include basic nutrition, biochemistry, economics, management theories and advanced nutrition classes such as maternal and child and disease management. Additionally, one must take and pass a registration examination. In order to maintain registration, 75 hours of continuing education is required every 5 years. Once an individual is registered, licensure may be obtained via the state in which the dietitian will practice. Registered Dietitians may also go on to obtain board certifications via the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) in areas such as renal nutrition, sports

nutrition, and pediatric nutrition. They also qualify to work toward becoming Certified Diabetes Educators (CDE) and Certified Nutrition Support Clinicians (CNSC) via the American Society of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (ASPEN) if they choose. All dietitians are nutritionists, but not all nutritionists are dietitians (www.eatright.org, www.cdr.net, www.nutritioncare.org/nbnsc/).

A "nutritionist" is not a professional designation, and does not imply that the individual using this title has any formal, credible nutrition education or degree. However, to add to the confusion, in many Canadian provinces dietitian colleges are legally restricting the use of "nutritionist" for Registered Dietitians. As a result, the titles, "nutritionist" or "nutritional consultant" or other such terms are used by individuals who are unlikely to have received a nutrition degree at a university. Oftentimes, individuals who call themselves nutritionists offer unsafe nutrition advice and can work against physicians by telling people to stop taking medications or to take herbal supplements instead of, or combined with, physician prescribed medications.

According to the American Dietetic Association (ADA), nutrition misinformation has harmful effects on the health and economic status of consumers. In a 2002 position paper, the ADA stated "Misinformed consumers may not only have a false sense of security about their health and well-being, but they also may delay appropriate, effective healthcare or replace it with products, services, or behaviors that may be harmful to their health or, at best, do no good or harm" (American Dietetic Association, 2002).

For the most part, nutritionist is not a licensed title. There is, however, something called a Certified Nutrition Specialist (CNS), which is a licensed nutritionist. Certification as a Certified Nutrition Specialist (CNS) requires an advanced degree (Master's or PhD). A Certified Nutrition Specialist (CNS) is required to recertify every five years from their initial date of certification. A recertification fee and 75 continuing nutrition education credits (CNE's) are mandatory to maintain the CNS designation (www.cbns.org). There are dietitians who will obtain the CNS credential, but a CNS is not necessarily an RD and will NOT be covered by insurance companies or Medicare.

A January 2000 consensus report by the Institute of Medicine recognized the RD as the only qualified nutrition professional. No other health care professionals were found to have the education, clinical training, continuing education and credentials to conduct medical nutrition therapy for patients. In the summary, the report

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stated that “Many health care providers have some education in nutrition. However, the Registered Dietitian has the greatest amount of academic and clinical training in nutrition and food science. Basic nutrition education and advice can be provided by most health care providers, but should reflect sound evidence in the literature. The nutrition professional should be involved in educating other health professionals regarding nutrition interventions and practical suggestions for dietary change that he/she can use to educate patients. With appropriate training, all health professionals should be involved in reinforcing the concepts of nutrition therapy provided by the nutrition professional” (Institutes of Medicine, 2000).

So now the question is where can a physician find a registered dietitian to provide nutrition services for their patients? Unfortunately, with the exception of patients diagnosed with Diabetes Mellitus or renal failure on dialysis, insurance, Medicare and Medicaid providers do not cover nutrition counseling. With the upcoming healthcare reform, the ADA has been working diligently with lawmakers to put the Registered Dietitian into the language and get treatment, prevention and wellness nutrition services covered. It is important to know, however that this is not final and oftentimes patients will still need to pay out of pocket to see a registered dietitian. It is possible to find a dietitian by utilizing the ADA and El Paso Dietetic Association websites (www.eatright.org

and www.eatrightelpaso.org). There are also private practice RD's who can be contacted at www.elpasonutritionconsultants.com and www.pilateselpaso.org. Patients unable to pay for care may go to the ADA website as well as the American Heart Association, American Cancer Association and American Diabetes Association websites for more information. Finally, be sure to look for fellow Healthcare Heroes, local Registered Dietitians who will also be volunteering their time for this much needed voluntary service project.

REFERENCES

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