

The Health Professional's Role in Nutritional Care

The importance of nutrition in the prevention of illness and disease has long been recognized. Now, attention has turned toward the healthcare professionals who serve a key role in promoting healthy eating.

Health professionals, including nutritionists and nurses, encounter nutrition issues every day. Nutrition is important in the care of obese people, critically ill patients, people with eating disorders, people with food allergies, and a wide range of other clinical problems.

"Many nutrition professionals are passionate about helping others with specific conditions; from diabetes to weight loss, anxiety and depression, to sports nutrition," says Nicole Hodson, NC, executive director of the National Association of Nutrition Professionals (NANP). "The specializations within the field are broad and vast. While many nutrition professionals do focus on certain conditions, any nutrition professional is trained to assist with a multitude of health concerns."

Value of Nutrition

In the past few decades, there has been increasing recognition of the value of prevention. Not only is public interest in nutrition on the rise, but soaring healthcare costs have many turning to healthy lifestyles as a solution.

According to the International Food Information Council's 2011 Functional Foods/Foods for Health Consumer Trending Survey, a majority of Americans (87%) are interested in learning more about foods with benefits.

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With more people choosing to take charge of their health, there is a need for healthcare providers who can help guide them in meeting their nutrition goals. Health professionals are influential in motivating people to exercise and incorporate healthy foods into their diets.

A healthcare professional's role in nutritional care varies depending on the job. Depending on the nature of the problem, a healthcare team might include physicians, nurses, nutritionists, dietitians, and others such as pharmacists, mental health counselors, and physical therapists.

Nutritionists are at the forefront of nutritional care. According to the NANP, a nutrition professional can advise, counsel, coordinate, educate, guide, inform, suggest, and support. A nutrition professional can develop a comprehensive nutrition program, including nutrition and lifestyle goals.

"Holistic nutrition professionals work with individuals to help them understand that good digestion and good health go hand-in-hand," Hodson says. "Poor digestion is the precursor to countless illnesses, both directly and indirectly, and as such, can have a significant impact on body, mind, and spirit."

Nurses and Nutrition

Meanwhile, nurses are becoming more involved in nutritional care, particularly health education.

"The nurse's role in nutrition is two-fold and depends on the level of nurse," says Dr. Cyndi Faudree, the lead faculty member for the Family Nurse Practitioner specialization in the Master of Science in Nursing program at South University. "The role of associate's and bachelor's level nurses (not advanced practice) is to assess and educate, not to treat. The advanced practitioner would develop a nutrition plan and tell the patient what to eat."

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Nurses are often the ones who spend the most time with the patient. Therefore, their understanding of nutrition is critical.

"[Nurses] make sure the gaps are filled for the patient," Faudree says. "We make sure the patient truly understands what they should be doing."

Nutritionists also work closely with patients. Like nurses and other healthcare providers, they must understand each patient's unique needs.

"Nutritionists tend to work in a one-on-one environment, with a focus on the individual and a deep commitment to addressing each person's biochemical individuality," Hodson says. "Nutritionists operate with the understanding that what may be right for one individual may be completely inappropriate for another."

In addition to physical diagnosis, condition, health history, and age, Faudree says practitioners should also consider a patient's psychosocial status when developing a personalized nutrition plan.

"For example, I could tell a patient to eat more organic fruits and vegetables, however organic food is more expensive," she says. "So, I must consider their psychosocial status or I am telling them to purchase products that are outside of their budget."

Meeting people where they are has also sparked a growing effort toward community care. Community care focuses on individuals in their natural settings within their communities. Promoting nutrition and physical activity on the community level has proven effective. Health professionals in community-based settings are likely to have a major influence in the development of programs that promote nutrition.

Before coming to South University, Faudree was the program director for the AIM TO WINN program at Winn Army Community Hospital in Fort Stewart, Georgia. AIM TO WINN is a weight management program offering classes on nutrition, physical therapy, and behavioral health to men and women in the Winn military community. Faudree says active engagement between the public and healthcare professionals can make a positive impact.

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Education is also essential in preparing healthcare professionals to provide nutritional care appropriately. An understanding of the basic principles of nutritional science is the foundation for which healthcare professionals can help improve patient health outcomes.