

The role of the Dietitian in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

The role of the dietitian is to develop, implement and monitor nutritional strategies and interventions to meet the unique needs of critically ill patients in ICU. Critically ill patients often require one or more form of organ support (such as respiratory support) further complicating the nutritional requirements of critically ill patients. Deterioration of nutrition status in critically ill patients is associated with longer ICU and hospital length of stay, poorer functional outcomes, increased risk for infections and higher mortality.

The Dietitian in ICU

The dietitian will follow a systematic process in line with clinical guidelines and standards to calculate the patient's estimated requirements, construct a nutrition care plan and monitor the efficacy of the nutritional care plan. Patients in ICU unable to eat balanced meals may receive enteral nutrition (a specialised feeding formula given via a tube in the stomach or small bowel). Patients with an inaccessible gut for feeding may require parenteral nutrition (a complex nutritional formula administered via a central or peripheral line into a vein). This requires knowledge of diseases, the impact of diseases on nutrition and nutritional status assessment and monitoring. The dietitian must also have in-depth knowledge of nutritional products and feeding formulas.

How often will the dietitian see the patient?

Critically ill patients in the ICU will in most instances be seen daily by the dietitian. The dietitian has to monitor the patient for tolerance of the feeding formula and changes in the disease process which may necessitate a change in the feeding formula or nutritional intervention. Critically ill patients can have drastic and sudden changes in their condition which may impact directly on the patient's nutritional requirements such as a high fever. Daily dietetic involvement will ensure optimised nutritional care in the ICU.

Financial Implications

Dietitians are registered health professionals and act as independent practitioners registered at the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The dietitian will invoice your medical aid if you are admitted to an ICU in a private hospital. The dietitian will inform you or your family regarding the fee structure and different medical aids and plans have different policies in terms of paying for dietetic services. It is recommended that the patient's family contact the medical aid with regards to payment for dietetic services on admission to ICU.



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