

What a Dietitian Does

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Meriam Webster defines a dietitian as: “an expert in **dietetics**; that is, human nutrition and the regulation of diet. A dietitian alters their patient's nutrition based upon their medical condition and individual needs. Dietitians are regulated healthcare professionals licensed to assess, diagnose, and treat nutritional problems. “

A registered dietitian (RD) is a dietitian who meets all of a set of special academic and professional requirements, including the completion of a bachelor's degree with an accredited nutrition curriculum, an internship at an approved health-care facility, foodservice organization, or community agency, and satisfactory performance on a registration exam.

In South Africa, dietitians must be registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. The council regulates the following professional titles: Dietitians, Supplementary Dietitians, and Student Dietitians, as well as Nutritionists, Supplementary Nutritionists, and Student nutritionists. Requirements for eligibility for registration include a recognized bachelor's degree in dietetics or nutrition from an accredited educational institution. The undergraduate training should include the three practice areas of therapeutic nutrition, community nutrition, and food service management. Dietitians can then select any of these areas to practice. Even in these different areas there are dietitians who may develop a keen interest in specific components.

A clinical dietitian promotes nutrition in hospitals and nursing homes. This is the area of practice known as therapeutic nutrition. The primary role of a clinical dietitian is to design nutrition programs to improve or maintain the health of patients. These programs may be short-term, such as to ensure that proper nutrition is delivered to an accident victim until full healing has occurred. Or they may be long-term for patients with diabetes, kidney disease or old age conditions that affect proper nutrition. The programs designed may be preventive, for heart disease or obesity, or therapeutic to help a patient with heart disease maintain a baseline health and nutrition state. A clinical dietitian is often at the center of the interactions between doctor, patient, and the staff of the facility in which care is administered. A delicate balance sometimes exists between what a doctor recommends and a patient's ability to implement the nutrition program. Factors such as a patient's income, level of education, psychological and physical state, living conditions, family assistance, and ability to follow the program must be considered. Sometimes the clinical dietitian must provide a great deal of patient contact, counseling, and education to achieve that balance. Often dietitians are part clinician, part detective and part counselor.

Clinical dietitians who have a keen interest in critical care will monitor, assess, and optimize nutrition status based on the patient's current medical condition and/or nutrition adequacy. They

confer with physicians and other healthcare professionals to coordinate medical and nutritional needs, and they make recommendations for tube and intravenous feedings and/or dietary supplements.

This type of dietitian has the highly developed knowledge, skills and expertise within the field of critical care to manage the complex nutritional issues observed in these patients. Provision of nutrition support to ICU patients is complicated, and not all patients will benefit to the same degree (Alberda et al. 2009). The “critical care” dietitian is best placed to identify those at nutritional risk and those who are more likely to suffer harm if underfed. A Dietitian will assess and take account of the many factors influencing the nutrition support treatment plan. These include assessing nutritional risk, age, and the degree of inflammation, number of organ failures, co morbidities, projected length of stay and gastrointestinal function. Critical care treatment modalities also need to be considered

Another type of dietitian is a community dietitian. A community dietitian works with groups and individuals to promote healthy eating habits. He or she often will work in public health clinics and home health agencies. Dietitians play a key role in public health, as they promote a healthy lifestyle through better nutrition. The focus of their skills and competences lies in interpreting and communicating theoretical knowledge to enable individuals and groups, across the life-course, to make appropriate dietary choices and sustain healthy lifestyles

Therefore, public health dietitians may help reduce the number of premature deaths and significantly reduce the burden of preventable diet-related non communicable diseases (NCDs), overweight and all other forms of malnutrition which are strongly influenced by social determinants of health

Food service is an international operation often described as a system transforming inputs (human labor and skills, materials, facilities) to outputs (meal, customer satisfaction, financial accountability). Food service is an increasingly complex context, which will always be in a process of change as new demands occur and vary from country to country. As food and meals for vulnerable groups must be nutritious (for prevention or treatment) and tailored for specific individuals and groups, as well as being tasty, tempting and familiar they must be safe, sustainable and financially reasonable, there is a need of a person to look after all these aspects and that person is the “ dietitian”.

The role of the food services dietitian is not just rising, it’s evolving and expanding. RDs are valued because their skills are essential to the current food service industry. They play a key role in operations that provide meals for various target groups and settings, in fostering health, wellness and sustainability trends that clients and consumers demand today. Their knowledge is integral for complying with government regulations, collaborating with chefs on recipe and menu

development. Food service dietitians can work in health institutions, schools, nursing homes and pharmaceutical companies to promote and market better food and nutritional products.

Dietitians are able to participate in different roles depending on their interest. All of these roles are invaluable to the evolution of good health and overall well-being.