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NNEdPro Global Centre for Nutrition and Health

Advancing and implementing nutrition knowledge
to improve health, wellbeing and society

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Dietitians & their Role in Medical Education

In recent years, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been increased interest in the role of nutrition in health. Examples include the recent UK Government obesity strategy, as well as a greater number of medical practitioners seeking opportunities to integrate nutrition and health behaviours into clinical practice. Dietitians are statutorily regulated nutrition professionals in the UK and, in Australia, dietitians are professionally accredited practitioners. However, as a small profession, only a fraction of the population has direct access to a dietitian, often via medical referral. Though many people may be familiar with the typical role of the dietitian in the acute and community settings of healthcare, they may be less familiar with those who apply their nutrition expertise and experience to work in education and leadership roles with other professional groups. One such field is in medical education.

Recent research¹ shows that nutrition is chronically underrepresented in medical curricula, regardless of country, setting or year of medical education.² This is despite the centrality of nutrition to health promotion and disease prevention, risk assessment and management of the most prevalent and burdensome non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and micronutrient deficiencies. NNEdPro has long been an advocate for an interdisciplinary approach to nutrition, aiming to raise the profile of nutrition in all areas of public health and healthcare. This includes more nutrition education in medicine, to encourage more first line nutrition assessment and improved links to specialist dietetic care and other nutrition services. This article is based on three podcasts recorded with dietitians who have used their qualifications and skills to champion nutrition in medical education, among other areas. They discuss opportunities and some of the challenges for dietitians branching out and offer plenty of inspiration as well as advice.

Leadership in holistic care to expand the biomedical model

Traditionally, healthcare has been based around a mainly biomedical model which arbitrarily defines health as an absence of disease, focusing on biochemistry, physiology and anatomy. Training has now progressed to a biopsychosocial model of healthcare, which is paramount to dietetic training according to Dr Alyce Wilson. Dr Wilson is a medical doctor and a Public Health Registrar based in Melbourne, Australia, but previously trained and worked as a dietitian.

“Training as a nutritionist or dietitian teaches you a lot about the social determinants of health because when you’re providing someone with dietary advice or nutrition guidance, you can’t not think about where they live, how do they cook, what’s their access to food, public transport, you know? Where do they live, what’s their level of education, what’s their cultural background, what is their health literacy like?”

Recognising unique and transferable skills in nutrition and beyond

Because nutrition is such an all-encompassing science, it is impossible to look at it with a purely biomedical lens and rather, it must be holistic in its nature. Food and eating are so fundamental in most people’s lives every single day and accordingly, dietitians learn to incorporate these complex social determinants of health into their practice, to the point where it becomes second nature to many. Once professionals begin to take their own skills for granted, it often leads to oversight of just how valuable these transferrable skills are and how they may be considered transformative in an associated field. This training and understanding makes dietitians ideal candidates to educate other professionals and students alike. Dr Duane Mellor is a Registered Dietitian and Senior Teaching Fellow at Aston Medical School and believes that nutrition is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to dietitians in education.

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- <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/nnedpro-global-centre/id1496856424>
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"I think that we need to go beyond just teaching nutrition...you need to be flexible in your approach to what you're going to teach; it could be communication skills as well as the nutrition content, it could be a physiological system, it could be something like metabolism as well"

Elaine Macaninch, a Registered Dietitian and Nutrition Medical Educator at Brighton and Sussex Medical School, added:

"I think that as dietitians, because we don't have medicine that we can prescribe...or we don't perform surgery, you know really a lot of our tool is the way that we communicate which I think is different to a lot of professions"

Promoting the benefits of inter-disciplinary working and utilising dietetic experience to determine nutrition priorities

Dr Tim Eden RD is a junior doctor currently working in Peterborough where he is completing a junior fellowship in gastroenterology. Before training as a doctor, Tim trained and worked as a dietitian and continues to occasionally take up bank positions as a dietitian, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having completed both roles, Tim is keen that dietitians never underestimate the role that they can play in educating other professionals and students.

"Dietitians should never underestimate themselves in terms of you know, how much they know and how much they can share, in terms of knowledge with medical students. I think that's where the finesse and skillset comes in is kind of knowing what is the more important stuff to really prioritise for doctors and medical students and I think that's where the medical schools and universities can work closely with dietetic departments and the British Dietetic Association to hone in and really say, "what stuff should we be adding to the curriculum?" and how do we best deliver that?"

All three interviewees as well as Elaine have been directly involved in lecturing medical students: Alyce and Tim when studying themselves, while Elaine and Duane in a professional capacity. Having trained and worked as a dietitian, Alyce noted the lack of nutrition coverage in her lectures, which tended to include some slides on the Krebs's cycle and little else. She advocated for more nutrition in their curriculum, to the point that they asked her to provide lectures to her peers, something which she enjoyed and continued for many years since graduating. Similarly, Tim was instrumental in establishing an e-learning package in Barts and the London Medical School, which has now been extended to include practical elements such as objective structured clinical examinations (OSCE).

It is important to note that increased nutrition in medical curricula does not negate the role of a dietitian as a specialised nutrition professional. In fact, Tim agreed with James (also a Registered Dietitian) that it should not be viewed as a threat to dietitians but rather an opportunity to improve screening and onward referral, to improve access to dietetic expertise and to promote multidisciplinary working. Medical practitioners not specialised in nutrition may be well placed to initiate and support nutrition care, supported by dietitians as the experts. As Duane mentioned, there is no reason why dietitians should not be centrally involved in this training. Good patient care relies on a healthcare system starting at the front door. As educators and leaders in nutrition, dietitians can influence this patient journey every step of the way so good nutrition care starts before dietetic treatment, while supporting our colleagues to broaden skills and perspective to collaborate on the huge nutrition challenges we face in the UK and across the globe.

NNEdPro was established in 2008 through an equal partnership between doctors trained in nutrition (Ray *et al*) and dietitians (Douglas *et al*) interested in medical education; 12 years later half of both the inner core and wider networks of the NNEdPro Global Centre are made up of Registered Dietitians (or their equivalents) from across six continents. Nutrition and dietetics takes centre stage in an interdisciplinary environment, including medicine, health sciences as well as education and the social sciences, enabling NNEdPro to work across all areas of nutrition from molecules to mankind! The future of the dietetic profession, as well as associated professionals such as Registered Nutritionists in the UK (and their international equivalents), are of key importance to our global efforts in capacity building to strengthen nutrition in health systems, and as an inclusive think-tank we very much encourage the participation of tomorrow's leaders in nutrition and dietetics in all our key activities, including strengthening of nutrition in medical education.³ Through the recently launched International Academy of Nutrition Educators, we hope to further our mission of mentoring those with training in nutrition to further develop and benchmark their skills as educators in medicine, healthcare and beyond!

References: 1. Macaninch E, *et al.* (2020). Time for nutrition in medical education. *BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health*; 3(1): 40-48. 2. Crowley J, Ball L, Hiddink GJ (2019). Nutrition in medical education: a systematic review. *Lancet Planet Health*; 3(08): E379-E389. 3. Burch E, *et al.* (2017). Dietitians' Perspectives on Teaching Nutrition to Medical Students. *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*; 36(6): 415-421.

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