

Dietitians of Canada Input to Better Home Care in Canada Consultation

August 2016

Dietitians of Canada, the professional association representing dietitians at the local, provincial, and national level, is pleased to provide preliminary input to the Better Home Care in Canada consultations. As the voice of the profession, Dietitians of Canada strives for excellence in advancing health through food and nutrition. We believe it is essential that the proposed plan be developed with the input of a full range of health professionals to realize the benefits of interprofessional teams working to full scope of practice. We look forward to further dialogue concerning the development of the proposed National Homecare Plan.

Why are Dietitian Services Needed in Homecare?

Home care clients with poor nutritional status may have:

- Increased incidence of infections and life-threatening complications.
- Decreased activity with delayed physical rehabilitation.
- Delayed wound healing.
- Decreased immunity and resistance to infection.
- Impaired physical and cognitive function.
- Progressive weight loss leading to weakness (which can lead to falling) and apathy.
- Increased and prolonged use of critical care facilities and medications.
- Increased length of stay and readmission rates to hospital.
- Premature institutionalization and mortality.

Dietitians support home-based nutrition services that:

- Are accessible to all Canadians and respectful of diversity.
- Are integrated with other parts of the health care system.
- Will prevent and manage malnutrition and nutrition-related conditions.
- Will support health, independence, and well-being.
- Will assist Canadians to live at home, reducing the admissions to hospitals and other types of care facilities.
- Will minimize related fiscal and social costs.

Recommendations

Dietitians of Canada’s overarching recommendations for the development of a National Homecare Plan are:

1. Apply an interprofessional approach, including dietitians, to develop the plan and associated metrics that can be utilized in provincial/territorial health systems.
2. Support research to develop evidence-based best practices for integrated team-based homecare services that support patients/clients and caregivers across health sectors.

Interprofessional Approach to Development of Plan and Metrics

The Canadian Home Care Association’s *Portraits of Home Care in Canada* report notes the inconsistency in access to therapy services, including dietetics, between various jurisdictions in the country.¹ Some provinces/territories do not fund any dietitian services, while others include access to dietitian services only for specific types of clients, or based on referral decisions from care coordinators. An effective national homecare plan will use an interprofessional approach to planning, and be accompanied by sufficient health human resources, including dietitians, in provincial/territorial health service delivery systems.

The goals of the proposed plan articulated in the Better Home Care backgrounder can be best achieved by including a range of services, including dietitian services. For example, restorative care approaches to maximize physical function after injury or illness, will only be successful if the client is well-nourished and able to participate actively in therapy. Malnutrition is widespread in community-living adults: a recent Canadian study showed that almost half of patients admitted to hospital were malnourished, and that malnutrition was an independent predictor of increased length of stay and risk of hospital readmission.² Screening for nutrition risk, with comprehensive assessment and interventions planned by a dietitian in the homecare and primary care settings, could substantially decrease the rates of malnutrition on admission, and may decrease overall admission rates.

Dietitians support screening of all home care clients to determine their nutrition risk. Those with moderate or high nutrition risk must have a nutrition care plan developed and monitored by a dietitian. Simple nutrition screening questions, validated by the Canadian Malnutrition Task Force, can be incorporated into all initial assessments of homecare clients to determine the need for assessment by a dietitian.³ A more comprehensive online nutrition screening tool with links to resources, can also identify nutrition issues; the easy-to-use Nutri-eSCREEN® tool is available at www.nutritionscreen.ca. The interRAI-HC assessment instrument, used in several jurisdictions, provides several indicators that, taken together, provide a clearer picture of nutrition risk, however a recent study showed that this tool identifies fewer cases of risk compared to validated nutrition screening tools.^{4,5}

Key elements of effective processes that support interprofessional teams include:

- Understanding of team members’ scope of practice and contributions to patient/client care.
- Resources allocated for collaborative communication and regular meetings to create a collaborative team approach to patient care. As part of this effort, all health care providers need to be educated about interdisciplinary processes, and know the roles of the other team members. Providers who are located separately must develop specific additional strategies to enhance communication and team functioning.
- Systems to ensure services provided by the right provider at the right time. For example, clearly understood systems for other health professionals to determine appropriate and timely referrals to dietitians, and ability for patients/clients to self-refer for nutrition services. Allowing direct referrals between all health professionals in a team supports efficient and effective care.

- Shared health records to support access to patient/client data by all team members, as well as access to data for use in evaluation of programs and services.
- Systems to support communication across the health system, for example linkages to local acute care, primary care, long term care organizations, to promote continuity of care and support patient/client-centred processes.
- Equitable compensation for interprofessional team members with similar education and training.
- Resources allocated for professional development and access to evidence-based resources to support patient/client nutrition therapy and health promotion activities.

Research to Support Evidence-Based Best Practices in Home Care

Dietitians are strong advocates of evidence-based practice; Practice-Based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN®) is the global resource for knowledge translation and synthesis, providing evidence-based answers to questions encountered in dietetic practice, as well as links to tools and resources to support patients/clients. For more information about the PEN® system visit www.pennutrition.com. There are currently many gaps in the evidence base for nutrition services in homecare—however, absence of evidence does not indicate absence of effectiveness. There is an urgent need for investigation of outcomes and cost-benefit of dietitian services for homecare clients, based on clients receiving nutrition services from dietitians working at full scope of practice and with appropriate number of client contacts depending on the clients' condition. Dietitians of Canada can offer expertise in the research design and knowledge translation/dissemination to help support this research.

For further information:

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