

Dietitians stake their ground for the provision of expert nutrition advice

CLINICAL COMMENTARY



Dietitians Day was celebrated on 19 September. Here, dietitian **Jennifer Douglas** talks to primary care dietitians about how they and the profession contribute to improving your patients' lives through nutrition

Dietitians are the experts in nutrition, translating evidence-based research into practice to enable practical dietary changes to improve patient outcomes. Master's or postgraduate-trained in dietetics, most dietitians are prescribers for special foods on the Pharmac schedule.

In recent years, there has been a considerable rise in self-acclaimed "nutrition experts", bringing much confusion to individuals and health professionals about what is "good" nutrition. "Dietitian" is a protected term and requires registration with the Dietitians Board. Dietitians are audited regularly to ensure they maintain a high level of competence in nutrition knowledge.

On the flipside, anyone can call themselves a nutritionist. It is not currently a protected title and, although there are many registered nutritionists in New Zealand qualified to work in various fields under the Nutrition Society of New Zealand, there are some offering questionable advice. Therefore, it pays to check for any individual's registration.

Dietitians work in a wide variety of roles, many in primary care as community-based dietitians, and as hospital dietitians, food service dietitians and some in private practice. Dietitians are fantastic communicators and work well with the public and healthcare professionals. For example, I see children with allergies and work with GPs to perform allergy testing, and carry out elimination diets and retrials to identify food intolerance.

Dietitians working in food allergy educate families about how to identify allergens in foods, how to substitute foods in baking and cooking, and how to meet nutrient requirements (eg, calcium) while avoiding certain food groups. Working closely with GPs around food allergy is important, to identify true food allergy and intolerance, and avoid unnecessary food avoidance. This is just one example of dietitians and GPs working collaboratively for better health outcomes. Below are profiles of more New Zealand dietitians and how they integrate dietetics into primary healthcare.

Tonia Talbot and Naomi Johnson, primary care dietitians, Nelson Bays Primary Health

Tonia and Naomi are primary care dietitians who work in a variety of roles in the Nelson community. They deliver the Toddler Better Health Programme, an evidence-based obesity prevention programme. The aim is to provide parents with the knowledge, confidence and tools to grow healthy children. The pair work closely in partnership with Sport Tasman and other community groups to deliver the programme to whānau in the region.

Tonia and Naomi hold workforce development sessions with public health nurses, who do most of the B4 School Checks. They discuss the Ministry of Health Raising Healthy Kids target, and how public health nurses can have healthy conversations with parents and caregivers about their four-year-old's growth.

Tonia and Naomi receive referrals from GPs, practice nurses, public health nurses, clinical psychologists, Plunket nurses, paediatricians and other specialists. Patients are seen at their own general practice, which means they generally have access to full clinical records and they can have a quick chat to the GP or practice nurse about the patient or service – and the occasional tearoom discussion on the latest nutrition fad.

Common patients seen in the clinic might be:

- a newly diagnosed coeliac disease patient needing education on how to follow a gluten-free diet, with prescription for gluten-free foods
- a person with irritable bowel syndrome wanting to learn about the low-FODMAP diet
- a patient with type 2 diabetes about to start on insulin
- a child with autism who has sensory issues and a severely restrictive diet
- an obese patient with metabolic syndrome and a long



Hutt Valley dietitian
Jan Milne

history of dieting.

Both dietitians practise in a non-diet, intuitive eating paradigm, promoting health rather than weight loss, encouraging eating based on internal cues of hunger and fullness and emphasising size acceptance. There is growing evidence this approach is associated with lower BMI, improved psychological wellbeing and improved cardiovascular risk, irrespective of weight loss.

A combined 27 years' experience has shown Tonia and Naomi the damage a constant focus on weight loss and dieting can do to a person's health and wellbeing. They believe a good way to describe them would be as nutrition and behaviour counsellors, helping patients identify foods they enjoy and which are nutritious.

Tonia says she loves her job because of the daily variety. She enjoys meeting people from all walks of life and helping them find ways for a happier, healthier relationship with food.

Jan Milne, lead dietitian, Te Awakairangi Health Network

Jan's role as a dietitian working for Te Awakairangi Health Network, the PHO for the Hutt Valley, is as diverse as food.

Jan works with GPs and nurses to build skills, systems



Nelson Bays dietitian
Tonia Talbot

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Dietitians' top tips

1. Go for fresh and unprocessed foods as much as possible.
2. Try to eat well 90 per cent of the time – none of us are perfect.
3. Practice mindful eating – use your senses and notice what you like and don't like about the food.
4. Having a sweet treat? Choose petite.
5. Keep the skin on potatoes, kumara and other veges for extra fibre and minerals.
6. Keep an eye on portion sizes. A meat serving is the palm, not the arm.
7. Eating well is one of life's pleasures, try not to rush it.
8. Fill up half your plate with colourful, delicious veges.
9. Change one thing, and change it forever.
10. Buy your vitamins naturally packaged in food.
11. Make eating an event – take time to sit down, savour and enjoy your food.
12. Learn to love lentils – add to bolognese sauce, soups and salads.
13. Treat your body, whatever size or shape, with the love, compassion and nourishment it deserves.
14. Take the time to cook a family meal and share it together as often as you can.
15. You can't beat home-cooked meals – aim to make meals from scratch when you can.

and tools to provide effective intervention for nutrition-related conditions. Complex cases are referred to the dietitians, and priority populations can receive specialist nutrition services in their home with their whānau. Jan and her team work to link patients with pharmacists, mental health and exercise specialists to name a few. Her team supports community systems change in the Hutt Valley. Jan provides tailor-made programmes, such as "cooking skills on a budget". The team develops nutrition messages for radio, Facebook and DHB health highlights. Her team promotes healthy lifestyles at diverse community events through fun, interactive activities, and by having a say in the types of foods and beverages offered at the event.

Dietitians provide nutrition updates to GPs when clinical guidelines or new initiatives are released. For example, Jan visited most of the Hutt Valley practices to explain the Raising Healthy Kids target, how to calculate BMI centiles using WHO data, how to have a conversation with families about child growth and to provide tools for brief lifestyle interventions.

Dietitians are a specialist resource for GPs to access trusted information about dietary interventions. Jan and her team aim to add value so practices incrementally move towards best practice when providing nutrition and lifestyle advice.

Jan believes working as a dietitian in primary care is appealing because "what we eat", whether practitioner or patient, is relevant for the prevention and management of the major health conditions. Dietitians keep a watch on the latest research and can analyse and translate the findings into what it means for a person preparing a meal or choosing a snack.

Jan finds people have strong views on nutrition and are inquisitive to find "what is best" for an individual scenario. She feels satisfaction when she can reduce confusion, nudge food choices and build food skills and literacy. The food system is complex but we all have a role to play in helping families make one change at a time, for a healthy future.

This snapshot of some of the many ways dietitians work to improve health outcomes and prevent disease hopefully spurs you to think about the work dietitians do – and share among colleagues and your networks how you work closely with dietitians in your practice. ■

Jennifer Douglas is a registered practising dietitian in private practice at Jumpstart Nutrition in Dunedin, specialising in paediatric nutrition and gastroenterology