



dietitians:
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Public Health Nutrition is the promotion of good health through nutrition in order to reduce diet related illness in the population. The emphasis is on the health and well being in the whole population by developing programmes that consider all aspects of the 'farm to fork' food chain and the wider determinants of good health, with a wide range of partners at local, regional and national levels, for example, education, voluntary and community sectors.

The increased emphasis on promoting public health and reducing health inequalities has provided great opportunities for dietitians. The unique knowledge, skills and experience of dietitians support the delivery of the public health agenda, in particular that of public health nutrition.

This leaflet serves to demonstrate the range and variety of work that dietitians are involved in within the field of public health, the knowledge, skills and experience that they bring to this area and how their work contributes to the UK government's public health agendas. Most dietitians contribute to public health, as whatever aspect of nutrition they may be involved with, there will be an element of supporting dietary change to promote well being and prevent ill health.

This leaflet outlines the role that dietitians have in public health nutrition, specifically those who specialise in this field and choose to use the title 'public health dietitian'. Supporting this work are dietetic assistants who may also have a public health role.

Policy context, the challenges and the contribution of Dietitians

Many recent documents place emphasis on preventive health care and health improvement. The fully engaged scenario described in the Wanless report (2002) emphasises the importance of public health as a long term strategy for the health of the population.

> They have skills in leadership and communication and continue to develop new ways of working to better deliver support for the needs of the communities in which they work <



Vanessa Stewart is a Community Dietitian working within the Northern Trust area of Northern Ireland. She is involved in a range of health promotion activities including: 1) Six week Cook it! programmes for community groups, Homestart, and school leavers; 2) Developing a six week healthy eating and lifestyle programme for a local Council to improve the health and well-being of staff; 3) Working with a community association to organise, and participate in, a Health MOT Check/health fair for local residents; 4) Training of Nurse Practitioners and Practice Nurses on weight management; and 5) working with a number of post-primary schools to create a whole school approach to healthy eating."

Documents from the Health Departments of England, Wales and Scotland ^(3,16,25) describe the contributions that Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), including dietitians, make in delivering on the various health agendas, including work in public health. Across the UK a series of policies/strategies/initiatives/services have been developed to implement the public health and public health nutrition agenda (some of the main ones are listed in Appendix I).

Dietitians and Public Health Nutrition

- > Dietitians are graduates uniquely qualified to translate the science of nutrition into safe, impartial, practical and up to date food based guidance for individuals and groups, and to develop policies that promote good health and reduce diet related disease in communities.
- > Dietetics is the practical application of nutrition in health and disease. The professional training includes scientific and social sciences as well as epidemiology and research surveillance and evaluation, providing all dietitians with the foundations for developing public health competencies.
- > Dietitians are trained in a broad range of practices across the profession. An established system of continuous professional development post-qualification supports deeper understanding and more expert practice in more specialist fields.
- > A public health dietitian is likely to have at least 5 years experience of working as a dietitian within a health care or community setting and will be experienced in collaborative partnership working before specialising in public health nutrition.

Collette O'Brien is a Dietitian Specialist working for the Southern Group Environmental Health Committee. This innovative post is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. Collette's role is to lead and co-ordinate diet and nutrition issues across 5 councils in the southern area. Collette works with a team of Environmental Health Officers to implement a Nutrition Tool kit in food businesses and workplaces. The toolkit outlines a model of good practice for any organisation/workplace to implement healthy eating guidance and practice. The role involves using a partnership approach to engage workplaces and food businesses and provide training and support to make the healthy food choice the easier choice. Work is underway to develop an evaluation framework for the project. The post is challenging but provides a fantastic opportunity for a Dietitian to work in a new and exciting environment.



Dietetic Departments in conjunction with Western Health and Social Services Board, Health Promotion Department, Midwives, Health Visitors and Community Paediatrics have redeveloped the 'Feeding Policy for the First Five Years'. This has been funded by Western Health and Social Services Board through Health Promotion and will be launched September '08. This policy, which is available to all health professionals working with this target group, provides evidence-based information on healthy nutrition for pregnant women, infants, young children and the wider family. The emphasis is on providing clear and consistent advice and support for parents, as they make their own nutritional choices, which will influence the health and well being of the next generation.



- > A dietitian working in public health nutrition has practical experience of working with individuals to achieve dietary change and has an understanding of the cultural, social, economic and psychological factors that determine behaviour change. This experience is vital in planning or implementing public health programmes that aim to change the diet of a community.
- > Dietitians have many skills that transfer from clinical practice including many of the recognised competencies required for work in public health.
- > Dietitians are trained in communication skills that enable them to use appropriate language/non verbal communication to deliver information to a range of audiences.
- > Dietitians are the only nutrition professionals, with a legally protected title regulated by the Health Professions Council (HPC), acknowledged by all Government departments and the National Health Service. The protected title requires dietitians to demonstrate competence to practice throughout their career to ensure that they retain their skills to practice safely and effectively within their evolving scope of practice (HPC 2005).
- > The Community Nutrition Group is a specialist group of the BDA and supports Public Health Dietitians by providing a forum for training and information exchange.

Dietitians working in Public Health

The Department of Health (www.dh.gov.uk - CMO features archive section - last accessed March 2007) describes three broad categories of people working in public health. Dietitians can be found working in roles within all three domains:

- 1) Those whose job includes an element of health improvement and reducing inequalities. For many dietitians this is a part of their clinical role in supporting patients and their carers eg
 - i) A dietitian developing and running Diabetes Education Sessions.
 - ii) A dietitian providing heart health advice.
- 2) Professionals that spend a major part, or all of their time, in public health practice. e.g. public health dietitians
- 3) Public health specialists who work at a strategic or senior management level or at a senior level of scientific expertise.



Angela McComb registered as a dietitian in 1988 and moved to work in the field of public health in 1990. She is currently Senior Manager: Public Health with the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, with responsibility for work within areas of nutrition, oral health and physical activity (early years). She has had an advisory role to the Department of Education and the Education Library Boards in Northern Ireland for several years on the development, implementation and evaluation of nutritional standards for school meals and more recently for other food in schools. Angela has worked collaboratively to lead the development of Northern Ireland's first food and nutrition strategy, the development and implementation of nutritional standards for use throughout the childcare sector; and the development of a community-based nutrition education programme in Northern Ireland called 'Cook it!'.

Dietitians work collaboratively as part of both dietetic teams and multi-agency teams, with a range of organisations recognising that improved nutrition and health policy delivery requires a co-ordinated approach.

They have skills in leadership and communication and continue to develop new ways of working to better deliver support for the needs of the communities in which they work.

The future for dietitians in public health

The policy agenda continues to place emphasis on promoting good health and well being. There is recognition that reducing nutrition related illness is vital to achieving this goal. There is going to be a continuing and increasing need for people with nutrition/dietetic skills to work in this specialist area of public health nutrition.

Dietitians are ideally placed to further develop the field of public health nutrition.

Work is being carried out:

- > by the BDA - to provide guidance for dietitians working in public health on how to develop competencies to work in this field
- > by the Department of Health - development of National Occupation Standards for Public Health Practice (2004); development of National Standards for Specialist Practice in Public Health (2001)
- > by the UK Voluntary Register for Specialists in Public Health - a retrospective portfolio assessed route into the qualification of Public Health consultant. The experience of Public Health dietitians and nutritionists is recognised as one of a number of specialist areas that can access the training to gain this qualification.

The BDA promotes the role of the public health dietitian as a specialist area of work within the profession, and believes these roles and opportunities will expand our profession. Dietitians have many of the skills to undertake these roles and can develop further responsibilities given opportunities and a recognised set of required competencies. This is an emerging area of practice for dietetic professionals. Using a public health dietitian adds value to the public health workforce.

For more information on the role of dietitians in public health, contact The Education and Professional Development Team at the BDA (www.bda.uk.com) or The BDA Community Nutrition Group, www.cnguk.org

The Bank Your Smile project, funded by Western Health and Social Services Board via the Health Promotion Department is a community-led initiative that seeks to address the oral health and nutrition needs of 0-11 year olds in the west bank area of the Foyle. Tooth brushing and nutrition programmes (healthy breaks and healthy lunch boxes) are currently being delivered in all 23 primary schools, and 100 nurseries and pre-schools in the area. This project has involved Health Promotion, Community Dental Service, WHSSB, Health Visitors, Surestart, Community Dietetics, Community Health Workers and Western Education and Library Board. Further targeted work in each of the 5 community areas is planned. Evaluation is ongoing until 2012.

> Dietitians also work on a consultancy basis and are involved in a wide range of work including work with local communities and delivering training

The Good Food Toolkit is a training pack for Community Workers. The toolkit aims to promote consistent nutrition messages and is specifically designed for community workers working with adults. Currently training is delivered within the EHSSB area by the Community Nutrition and Dietetic Service, Belfast HSC Trust. Evaluation of the toolkit, future support for those currently trained and resource issues are currently being addressed.

Dietitians within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust are working regionally, as are dietitians throughout all regions of Northern Ireland, to provide accredited training to professional groups e.g. Environmental Health Officers. This training is being co-ordinated by the Health Promotion Agency and to deliver on recommendations within the Fit Futures report which looks at providing accredited nutrition training for professionals who have a remit for health and well being. Funding is currently via the Health Promotion Agency.



> Dietitians involved in public health work are employed by a variety of organisations including the NHS, Local Authorities, Government Agencies, Research/Education establishments, Industry and Charities. <

A Community Dietitian in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, working in close partnership with a Dental Officer, developed a Healthy Breaks Initiative for primary schools to facilitate healthy snacks and water provision. The project introduced Healthy Break policies into primary schools and provided training for teachers, catering staff, ancillary staff and parents. Extensive resources were also developed and distributed to schools, these include a Healthy Breaks Tool kit, CD rom and leaflets. Unfortunately this post came to an end in March 2008.

Lyn Donnelly has worked in the Public Health Department of the Southern area of N Ireland for over 18 years and currently leads on implementing the N Ireland public health Investing for Health Strategy there. Key aspects of this work involve developing partnership approaches to enhancing opportunities, skills and knowledge about the impact of the determinants of health on individuals and communities. This includes developing and supporting nutrition based projects in schools, successfully bidding for funding for research into obesity in children with learning difficulties and promoting specific settings based projects to encourage healthy food choices. See www.southernifh.com

Jennifer McBratney is a dietitian based at the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland and is working as the regional food in schools coordinator. This post is funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services and Personal Safety for Northern Ireland and supports the implementation of Fit Futures and policies that relate to food in schools. Jennifer's role includes policy development, research and she has an advisory role to the Department of Education and key partners on nutrition and health in schools. As part of her programme she is currently developing resources that will support schools in implementing the nutritional standards for food in schools and establishing curriculum links.

Kerry Parkhill has been seconded from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to work for the North Eastern Education Library Board as a schools dietitian. This post is the first dietetic post in the province to be based within the actual education board and this alliance has proved to be hugely successful by allowing Kerry the opportunity to work closely alongside education advisors, teachers and catering staff consolidating the whole school approach to healthy eating.

Mainstream funding has been received by:

- The Community Nutrition and Dietetic Service (CNDS) Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (HSC Trust) from the Eastern Health and Social Service Board (EHSSB) to sustain a number of projects previously funded by the Big Lottery Fund namely Cook it!; Weigh to Health; Dig it and Eat it.
- The Cook it! team in the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCCT). This funding is to continue to co-ordinate existing nutrition initiatives and develop further their work supporting food and nutrition projects based in the community and voluntary sector. The team launched themselves as the Community Food and Nutrition Team at the end of April. This team will provide input and training to empower staff and volunteers from the community to deliver food projects that are based on sound nutrition information.



The second phase of an exciting initiative to target childhood obesity is underway in the EHSSB area. The initiative called FRESH (Food, Relaxation, Exercise, Self-esteem and Health) targets year 9 pupils who are obese. The programme aims to help the children become more active as well as improving their eating habits and self esteem. The work has been commissioned in EHSSB and developed by the Community Dietitians in Belfast HSC Trust in partnership with School Nursing, Community Sports Development, Council Leisure Services, Psychology and Health Promotion. The programme is run over 18 consecutive weeks and consists of at least 2 separate hours of physical activity and one hour of either nutrition or self-esteem sessions. Plans are underway to extend the programme within the EHSSB area.



Ruth Balmer is currently on secondment as Dietitian with the Food Standards Agency for Northern Ireland. The post was set up to support the development of initiatives within the Agency's Strategic Plan, Eating for Health, which aims to encourage consumers to choose a healthy diet, make healthy choices an easier option and help to reduce diet-related diseases. Some of the activities she is involved with include; supporting discussion with key partners in Northern Ireland on nutritional standards in institutions, for example, universities and school, as well as addressing nutritional and food related needs of older people who live alone and the development of a peer training toolkit for older people.

Appendix I - Key Health Documents/Initiatives

England

- 1 Department of Health, June 2008, High Quality Care for All: NHS next stage review final report.
- 2 Department of Health, 2006, Our Health, Our Care, Our Say.
- 3 DH, 2008, Framing the Contribution of Allied Health Professionals.
- 4 Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A Cross Government Strategy for England, 2008.
- 5 Department of Health, November 2004, Choosing Health: Making Healthy Choices Easier.
- 6 Department of Health, March 2005, Choosing a Better Diet: a food and health action plan.
- 7 Department of Health, March 2005, Choosing Activity: a physical activity action plan.
- 8 Department of Health, March 2005, Delivering Choosing Health: Making Healthier Choices easier.
- 9 Wanless, D, 2002, Securing our Future Health: Taking a Long Term View. Final Report. London: HM Treasury.

Northern Ireland

- 10 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; A Healthier Future: A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland (2005-2025).
- 11 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, March 2002, Investing for Health.
- 12 DHSSPSNI, June 2007, Healthy Mouth, Healthy Body - Oral Health Strategy for Northern Ireland,
- 13 Fit Futures Focus on Food Activity and Young People, January 2006.
- 14 The Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, 1996, Eating and Health. A Food Nutrition Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Scotland

- 15 The Scottish Government, 2007, Better Health, Better Care Action Plan
- 16 The Scottish Government, 2006, Delivering Care, Enabling Health. Harnessing the Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions contribution to implementing Delivering for Health in Scotland.
- 17 The Scottish Government 2008, Healthy Eating, Active Living: An action plan to improve diet, increase physical activity and tackle obesity (2008-2011)
- 18 The Scottish Office, 1996, Eating for Health: A Diet Action Plan for Scotland.
- 19 Scottish Executive, 2003, Improving Health in Scotland: The Challenge.
- 20 The Scottish Executive, 2004, Eating for Health: Meeting the Challenge, Co-ordinated Action, Improve communication and leadership for Scottish Food and Health Policy.
- 21 NHS Scotland, 2006, Review of the Scottish Diet Action Plan, Progress & Impacts (1996-2005)
- 22 Food Standards Agency Scotland: Food Standards Agency Scotland's Diet and Nutrition Strategy: our role in implementing the Scottish Diet Action Plan (2003-2006).

Wales

- 23 Welsh Assembly Government, June 2007, One Wales: A progressive agenda for the government of Wales.
- 24 Welsh Assembly Government, May 2005, Designed for Life: Creating World Class Health and Social Care in Wales in the 21st Century.
- 25 Welsh Assembly Government, November 2006, a Therapy Strategy for Wales, The Contribution of Therapy Services to Transforming the Delivery of Health and Social Care in Wales, Therapies for Modernisation.
- 26 Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, Food and Fitness, Promoting Healthy Eating and Physical Activity for Children and Young People in Wales, 5 year implementation plan.
- 27 Welsh Assembly Government, 2007, Appetite for Life
- 28 Health Challenge Wales.
- 29 Food Standards Agency Wales, 2003, Food and Wellbeing: Reducing inequalities through a nutrition strategy for Wales.

Website references

www.bda.uk.com	www.skillsforhealth.org.uk	www.hpc-uk.org
www.dh.gov.uk	www.riph.org.uk	www.fhascot.org.uk
www.physicalactivityandnutritionwales.org.uk		

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