



Specialist Dietitians in Public Health

It is essential that those providing support and education about nutrition to commissioners, businesses, NHS Trusts, local authorities and the public give consistent, evidence based information. Dietitians have unique training and experience to enable them to do this.

Role of the Public Health Dietitian

The Public Health environment has changed with the transfer of Public Health function to local authorities. Many Public Health Dietitians have moved with the Public Health Teams and are commissioning nutrition services to improve the health of their local population. Others have remained in the NHS or work in private practice, and develop local policy and deliver programmes and projects.

Public health dietitians use their knowledge and expertise to set the record straight. Using evidence based messages and recommendations which promote healthful food and drink consumption, public health dietitians can support organisations and the public in many settings to reduce confusion about food and diet.



Obesity

Nearly two-thirds of adults (63%) in England were classed as being overweight (BMI of 25+) or obese (BMI of 30+). Prevalence continues to increase and it is estimated that overweight and obesity in adults will reach 70% by 2034.² It is estimated that obesity costs the wider economy £27 billion.³

Malnutrition

Malnutrition affects over 3 million people in the UK. The cost in England in 2011/12 was £19.6 billion – a 50% increase from 2007.⁴

Costs of a poor diet

Long term conditions are the biggest burden on the NHS.¹ Diet is a key factor in the prevention of many long term conditions such as CVD, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. It is central to the prevention of obesity and malnutrition (or “undernutrition”).

Confusion regarding the effects of food on health

The media frequently publishes confusing and contradictory stories about diet.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of consumers whose diets could be healthier cite “too much conflicting information about which foods are healthy and which are not” as a block to healthful eating.
- Food labelling and advertising also cause confusion.
- Exposure to contradictory health information can lead to a disinclination to take on well-established, evidence based health messages regarding food.^{5,6}

Public Health Dietitians are key in commissioning services, developing policy and managing projects that address these contrasting conditions in the context of reducing inequalities and reducing the burden on the NHS.

Interventions include the following:

Research

Leading research into local food needs.

Describing the evidence base regarding food related illness and prevention.

Environment

Advising local authorities on food issues relating to health, e.g. planning law & takeaways, sustainable food, affordable food.⁷

Ensuring that the healthful choice is the easy choice by supporting food outlets to provide healthy options. This includes commercial food providers as well as schools, staff dining rooms and the healthy eating CQUIN (Commissioning for Quality and innovation).

Advise on practical approaches that lower environmental impact.⁸

Education

Provision of printed & web based information.

Facilitating group sessions for members of the public to provide information to prevent disease e.g. heart disease.

Facilitating training for health & social care workers to ensure that information given to clients is evidence based & reliable.

Projects and programmes delivered over a period of time to support groups to make good nutritional choices e.g. in schools & community groups.

Empowerment

Delivering training & the development of skills to help people provide healthful food for themselves and their families.

Working in partnership to develop community centred projects to meet community needs.

References

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The British Dietetic Association, founded in 1936, is the professional association for dietitians in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with over 8,000 members. The BDA is also an active trade union. To find out more about other areas of work that dietitians are involved in please visit:

www.bda.uk.com

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