



Claire Irlam has just completed her second placement and third year studying Dietetics at Coventry University, which Her passion is multi-disciplinary working and promoting the profession of dietetics, which she does through her professional twitter account @ClaireIrlamRD2b. In her spare time she plays the flute in music groups and attends gym classes.

LOVE WHAT YOU DO!

Last month saw the return of the British Dietetic Association's (BDA) 'Dietitians Week' campaign (BDA 2016a), the third annual week of promoting the work of dietitians and spreading healthy lifestyle advice. As well as the usual 'trust a dietitian' message (BDA 2016b), this year's theme also promoted workplace health, including physical activity in the workplace and protection of break times. Dietitians and dietetic students across the country were out in force to present displays to colleagues and the public.



So why is this campaign needed? As soon as I was considering applying for a career in dietetics, I was met with puzzled looks from friends and family. Not only does this resonate with every dietitian or dietetics student I have met since, it is also reflected in literature surrounding the topic. For example, Crocker found in 2000 that when supermarket customers were asked about the role of a dietitian, responses included 'completing menu cards for patients' (26% of those asked) and 'meal preparation' (21% of those asked).

As well as raising awareness of our role to the public, knowledge of each other's capabilities is essential within a multi-disciplinary team. A study in America (Semans 2014) investigated medics' perceptions of dietitians, which were found to be very positive. However, the research also found that service users most entrusted doctors when seeking nutritional advice, placing them ahead of both dietitians and nutritionists. As medics' training of nutrition is limited, it is vital that all healthcare professionals are aware that dietitians are the clinical specialists in this area to ensure appropriate referrals. However, with less than 9000 registrants, dietetics is a small profession within the UK compared to others in healthcare, as shown below. Therefore, it is important that each and every one of us strives to create a positive image of the profession and promote this image wherever possible.

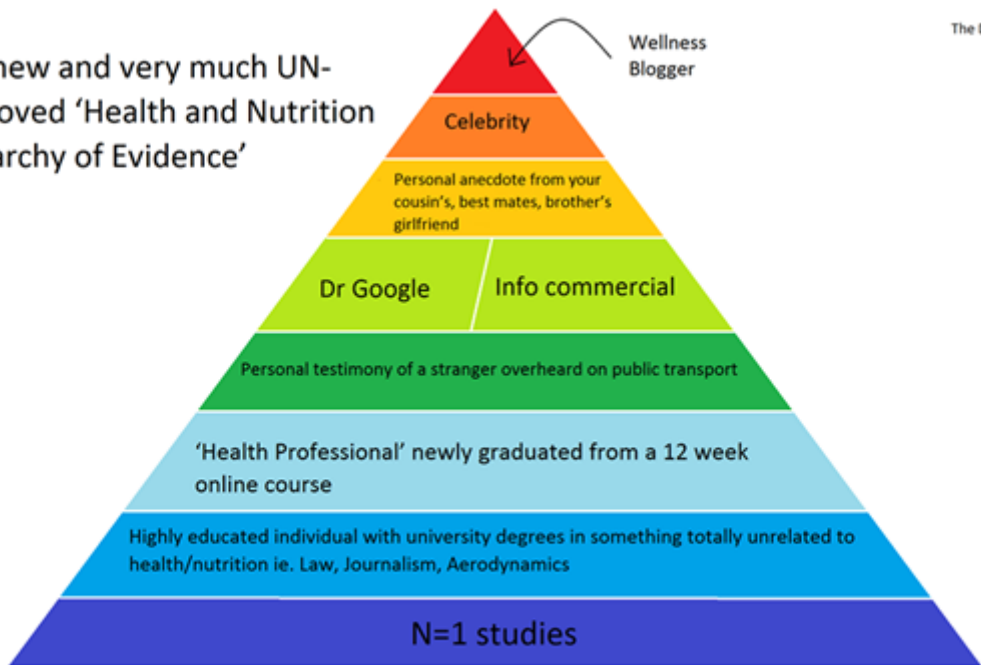


(Jones 2016)

Despite dietitians being around for centuries (BDA 2016c), promoting our profession has become more crucial than ever with a recent influx of dietary information freely available in print, on television and online. Through the eyes of the unknowing public, “dietitian” has just become another meaningless title lost within a sea of nutrition advice from nutritionists (qualified or otherwise), juice promoters and celebrity brand advocates. In the updated version of the Hierarchy of Evidence to reflect current sources of nutrition used by the public, The Dietitian’s Pantry demonstrated this observation by omitting dietitians from it altogether (see below).

However, this isn’t merely a case of arguing about which ‘experts’ are better. It would be naïve to imagine that alternative nutrition advice will disappear overnight and more importantly, a lot of it has its place if we each work within our individual capabilities and recognise our limitations. I am more than happy to trust a celebrity chef when seeking a tasty recipe, but not if it boasts ‘superfood ingredients’ with ‘detoxing properties’. Similarly, it is important not to dismiss nutritionists with accredited qualifications – but dietitians need to make their own mark, rather than standing in the nutritionists’ shadow.

The new and very much UN-improved ‘Health and Nutrition Hierarchy of Evidence’



(The Dietitian’s Pantry, 2016)

So with all of these sources to choose from, why should the public ‘trust a dietitian’?

- Dietitians work in a variety of settings including: clinical, public health, freelance, industry, research and sports. Within these, they can advise specifically for many different health conditions from diabetes and irritable bowel disease to chronic kidney disease and cystic fibrosis. Therefore, it is important to inform others that the work of dietitians is not limited to weight management, as many seem to believe.
- Contrary to faddy diets, dietitians use a complete diet and lifestyle approach. They combine nutritional assessment with patient values and behaviour change techniques to enable realistic sustainable changes which don’t require restricting a particular food group or relying heavily on another.
- Dietitians are the only professionals who are qualified to assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional conditions (BDA 2014b). Referrals can be made via medical professionals or patient self-referrals if seeking freelance dietitians.
- Advice is evidence-based so their advice will always reflect the latest credible research.
- “Dietitian” is the only nutrition title which is protected by the law within the UK, guaranteeing consistency of quality amongst them (BDA 2014a). They must also comply with ethical standards, which ensures that dietitians are honest and work to the service users’ best interests.
- Anybody practising under this title within the UK has completed university training which complies with specific standards, including experience of clinical placements. Undergraduate dietetic degree courses comprise of many modules, encompassing topics such as psychology, social health, food production, communication techniques, biochemistry and physiology, alongside the underlying nutrition, which gives us a unique set of skills.

It seems that dietitians can boast a lot of expertise which many other nutrition experts cannot. So if this is the case, why are we so rarely turned to by the public when seeking advice? As

OffDutyDietitian.com explains, many of the techniques used by self-acclaimed diet experts are unavailable to dietitians, who must comply with standards of practice set by their professional bodies.

Therefore, whilst we are often successful in achieving goals for our service users, our confidentiality-respecting accomplishment statistics cannot compete with before and after photos of crash dieters in bikinis.

Raising the profile of dietetics is not only beneficial to the overall profession and to the public who will be educated on where to receive accurate dietary advice. It can also be to each individual dietitian and student’s advantage to have the positive work of dietitians more widely publicised. Any extra-curricular activities which showcase yours and other dietetic students’ hard work would be a shining addition to any professional portfolio. In addition to this, the more understood and respected we are by colleagues and the public, the more accurate referrals we will receive, which promotes positive working relationships and increased job satisfaction. Amongst the countless benefits of raising our profiles, wouldn’t it be great to be able to simply state your job title to somebody and not be met by a blank face?

There are many ways in which student dietitians can help to raise the dietetic profile further. An easy and flexible way to get involved is to begin a blog or have a positive social media presence. Online interactions are becoming increasingly popular, allowing people to communicate outside the constraints of time and location. It is best to choose a medium with which you are familiar and comfortable, whether that be Facebook, Twitter, Youtube or something else. A great way to get started is by following other dietitians and students to familiarise yourself with suitable content and to get ideas. Hashtags are useful for connecting with wider communities and trending topics, and including photographs can make your account visually appealing. However, it is also important to obtain consent before uploading any images of others and to maintain patient confidentiality. It is also key to remain polite and professional and ensure that any information spread is accurate and that sources of information are cited (Barth and Seher 2012). For further guidance on using social media professionally, refer to codes of conduct from the BDA and HCPC (BDA 2013 and HCPC n.d.).



Another great way to spread the word about dietetics is to take any opportunities available for meeting new people and explaining our role. Universities often offer extra-curricular events which are useful for this, or alternatively you could collaborate with other students or dietitians to take part in existing community or national events.

At my university, I work as a student ambassador for Dietetics as well as for Health and Life Sciences, a position which is available at most universities. As well as discussing my course at open days (see below), this role has also allowed me to explain our career to school children at a community health event, as well as to adult carers while delivering a healthy eating presentation.

Remaining engaged with professional organisations including the BDA, HCPC and NHS helps when staying updated with current hot topics and events in the world of dietetics, as well as healthcare and nutrition. Plenty of ways for students to get involved are included on websites of these groups. Other examples of extra involvement include giving presentations about topics you find interesting, taking on charity or volunteer work, becoming involved in projects, writing articles and taking on student roles within organisations (Jones 2016). Although extra involvement is extremely beneficial for professional development, the main thing is that you choose something which you find enjoyable.

Whether you are engaging with others through media or face-to-face, it is really useful to find your niche. Remember the reasons which set dietitians apart from others and find a topic which really interests you so that you appear passionate. Confidence is also key when networking but utilise communication techniques taught throughout dietetic training and take every opportunity and practice will soon make perfect!

Promoting the hard work which each dietitian and dietetic student does is such a worthwhile and rewarding experience. Remember that if dietitians aren't spreading nutritional messages to the public, somebody less qualified will be – so get out there!

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