

People and Community Knowledge about the Role of Dieticians

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ABSTRACT

With the increase in non-communicable diseases, the role of dieticians has become increasingly essential over the years. People have opted to eat healthy foods to prevent certain diseases instead of getting sick and going for treatment. Dieticians have been crucial in this idea because they advise patients on what type of food to eat and not what to eat. Moreover, in the hospital setting, dieticians help patients with diet modification, give advice on nutritional labels and diet plans, provide dietary services and educational programs to patients, and so forth. However, the question is, are people familiar with the role of dieticians, or do they have limited knowledge. This paper aims to identify if people and the community know about the role of dieticians. The method involved answering a questionnaire by 530 randomly selected male and female adults. The findings revealed that more than half of the participants knew about dieticians and their contribution to preventing and controlling lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and gastrointestinal infections. Moreover, the findings were supported by evidence from peer-reviewed or scholarly sources talking about the role of dieticians in promoting health. In the case of an existing illness such as diabetes, dieticians advise the patients on the best dietary plan, which helps control the condition. Dieticians play an essential role in preventing and managing lifestyle diseases.

Key words: Dieticians, Nutrition, Community, Diseases

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that, on an annual basis, 41 million people die (approximately 71%) due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), globally. About a third of these deaths are premature as they occur between the ages between 30 and 69, and low- and middle-income countries bear the brunt of them, with 85% of their citizens accounting for premature global deaths due to NCDs [1]. There is a myriad of risk factors associated with NCDs, some of which are genetic and physiological and therefore, difficult to alter [2]. However, evidence also points to the significant role behavioural factors such as alcohol consumption, smoking, diet and nutrition have on the risk of NCDs [3]. For one, a systematic review on socioeconomic status and NCDs in low-income countries found that the leading risk factors for NCDs in this setting were behavioural. For instance, most

low socioeconomic groups had a less balanced diet and highly consumed alcohol [4].

Nutritional epidemiology has long established the adverse effects of a less balanced diet on health outcomes [5]. As a result of this awareness and population health promotion, over recent years, populations are increasingly encouraged to eat and maintain a balanced diet to prevent lifestyle diseases [6]. Some countries have even adopted the NOURISHING framework into their food policies [6]. The role of dieticians is then becoming more crucial as they advise patients on what to eat optimally for good health [7]. Within clinical settings, dieticians help patients in diet modification, giving advice on nutritional labels and diet plans, and providing dietary services and educational programs to patients, among other roles. Nonetheless, whether people are familiar with the part of dieticians or they have limited knowledge remains unknown, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where mortality and morbidity due to lifestyle diseases are common [7].

JUSTIFICATION

Dieticians play vital roles in the community to help in promoting healthier lifestyles for people. According to Barrea et al., 2021, the competence of various dieticians is based on their skilful way of communicating theoretical

information about nutrition to multiple people [8]. In the public health sector, a recognized role of dieticians includes creating menus for patients based on the food available in the hospital setting. Dieticians play a significant role in preventing and controlling specific diseases. Over time, their roles have evolved to provide food education, nutrition appraisal, and proper food storage [9]. The more the science of food and nutrition broadened, the more the role of dieticians expanded. Over time, dieticians have begun working with health practitioners in teaching the significance of nutrition.

According to Frohock, 2021, the role of dieticians has significantly increased over time, and many people have known the importance of seeking dietic advice to stay healthy. Dieticians have been recognized to play a vital role in helping prevent people from contracting certain diseases by offering guidance on the appropriate food to eat [10]. They have helped the community remain healthy and prevent certain premature deaths in society [11]. There has been a growing realization of the importance of nutritional advice, and the health sector has incorporated dieticians to work in hospitals. Dieticians come with many benefits. First, they have specialized education and training for food and nutrition that a typical individual lacks, which helps them develop a dietary plan that ensures a patient meets adequate nutritional needs and requirements. In addition, people with health problems such as health diseases can be assessed and provided with a food plan to help alleviate the health problems. According to Mann 2022, a dietitian in the community provides crucial information to ordinary people on the importance of eating the right food to stay healthy and prevent disease. Some of the lifestyle diseases that affect the dietary pattern of a person mainly cause some people. Therefore, community dieticians have been of significant help in instructing people to eat a balanced diet and consume certain nutrients. In spreading their nutritional education, community dieticians use various ways, such as books, well-designed posters, and various published health journals and articles. Moreover, in some situations, dieticians who work in the public health sector monitor restaurants to evaluate their hygiene, menu, and ingredients. They can assess the food server's health and offer guidance on the right menu to include.

This paper seeks to assess the community's level of knowledge about the role of dieticians. Due to the importance of dieticians in preventing and managing particular illnesses, the study also seeks to assess whether people understanding the role of dieticians will determine the ease with which they access the services of dieticians. Dieticians are well-trained professionals with significant skills in human nutrition and diet [12]. Therefore, this paper aims to understand the community's knowledge of dieticians.

OBJECTIVES

- To identify the knowledge that people and the community have regarding the role of dieticians

- To identify how dieticians play a specific role in preventing and controlling lifestyle diseases

In the context of developing economies faced with epidemiologic transitions as evident by the statistics above, dieticians should ideally be an integral part of healthcare systems and thus, well-known in communities. A majority of dieticians have college graduates in the dietary courses; they also constantly research to be updated on new dietary patterns. Business dieticians provide expert knowledge or opinion about food or a particular diet on radio shows or television. They also write corporate publications and books about nutrition, food, wellness, and health. Community dieticians work in public health facilities and formulate nutrition programs to benefit the residents. However, the overall goal of the programs is to create awareness about proper eating habits and nutrition among the targeted groups. Clinical dieticians are found in health care organizations such as hospitals, clinics, and nursing facilities [12]. They provide medical nutrition therapy to patients. Consultant dieticians only offer their services on contractual services with health organizations. Food service dieticians work in school canteens, prisons, company cafes, restaurants, and large-scale meal planning and feeding companies. They formulate new menus and initiate health programs. Gerontological dieticians are specialized in the dietary needs and nutrition of the elderly. Their primary responsibility is to create and develop healthy menus for older people and educate caregivers about healthy eating lifestyles. The hypothesis in this paper is that "The community's level of awareness of dieticians is adequate."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methodology

The primary study design was a survey in which the researchers collected quantitative data using semi-structured questionnaires that contained open-ended and close-ended questions. Participants were selected using systematic random sampling involving 530 male and female adults. The inclusion criteria were persons who had attained 18 years of age, persons with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, kidney disease, persons admitted to the ICU, and individuals with gastrointestinal disease. Exclusion criteria were people who had not attained 18 years of age and could not respond to the survey due to disability or impairment. They were then given questionnaires containing questions about the role of dieticians in preventing, controlling, and treating disease. The questionnaire was semi-structured in a manner in which participants gave Yes and No answers and also honest answers.

RESULTS

Out of the 530 questionnaires distributed, only 410 had complete answers. The table 1 below shows the results obtained from various responses by the research

Table 1: Various responses by the research participants.

Question	Yes	No
Have you heard of a dietitian	302	108
Dieticians play an essential role to prevent diseases	320	90
Dieticians play an important role to control diabetes	390	20
Dieticians play an important role to control hypertension	350	60
Dieticians play an important role to control kidney disease	310	100
Dieticians play an important role in ICU	150	260
Dieticians play an important role by following up with patients after discharges	201	209
Dieticians play an important role to control gastrointestinal disease	240	170
Dieticians play an important role to identify nutrition problem	193	217
Dieticians play an important role in assessing nutrition status	205	205
Dieticians work on enteral and parenteral feeding	102	308

participants.

Statistical Analysis

This study found that 74% of participants had heard of a dietitian while 26% had not heard of a dietitian. 78% thought that dieticians play an important role in preventing disease, while 22% did not think that dieticians play an important role in disease prevention. 95% held that dieticians play an important role in controlling diabetes while 5% did not believe dieticians play an important role in controlling diabetes. 85% stated that dieticians play an important role to control hypertension while 15% stated that dieticians do not play an important role in controlling hypertension. 76% responded that dieticians play an important role in controlling kidney disease while 24% responded that dieticians do not play an important role in controlling kidney disease. 37% held that dieticians have an important role in the ICU, while 63% held that dieticians did not have an important role. 49% stated that dieticians play an important role in following up with patients after discharge while 51% stated that dieticians do not play an important role in following up with patients after discharge. 59% responded that dieticians had an important role in controlling gastrointestinal disease while 41% responded that dieticians do not have an important role in controlling gastrointestinal disease. 47% stated that dieticians play an important role to identify nutrition problems while 53% stated that dieticians do not play an important role to identify nutrition problems. 50% stated that the dieticians play an important role to assess nutrition status while 50% stated that dieticians do not play an important role to assess nutrition status. 25% of the respondents thought that dieticians work on enteral and parenteral feeding while 75% thought that dieticians do not work on enteral and parenteral feeding. The response to the role of dieticians in living a healthy lifestyle was varied, with three-quarters of the respondents thinking dieticians do not have a vital role in living a healthy lifestyle and a quarter thinking dieticians have a vital role in living a healthy lifestyle.

DISCUSSION

From the response, it was clear that a high majority reported having heard about dieticians; 302 (about 74%) of the participants responded Yes, while 108 reported they had not heard about dieticians. The idea of dieticians has become more popular in the present age because people are opting for other ways to treat chronic diseases. In addition, the high number of participants' knowledge about the role of dieticians can be attributed to the digital era where getting information is accessible.

On the question of the role of dieticians in preventing diseases, 320 participants responded Yes that the dieticians have a role in preventing diseases, while 90 reported No that dieticians do not have a role in preventing diseases. Most chronic illnesses are preventable since they are linked to poor lifestyles and diet. Dieticians spread awareness regarding healthy eating habits at an individual and community level. They work hard to educate the public on good nutrition to create and maintain their health, which helps prevent diseases and hinder diet-related conditions such as obesity and malnutrition. At a community level, dieticians promote prevention by promoting household security and the elimination of hunger. According to Frohock (2021), many community projects in the U.S comprise dietitian services. Such projects include engaging the community on the issues related to good health, such as exercising. Dieticians are also found in hospitals and play a vital role in preventing survival and recovery and preventing more admissions to health care facilities by providing healthy eating habits [10]. They screen hospitalized patients to identify those at risk of developing certain diseases and subsequently offer nutrition interventions to impede the risks.

From the results, 390 participants indicated that dieticians have a role in controlling diabetes, while 20 responded that they do not have a role. Diabetes mellitus is a disease in which the blood glucose level in the body cannot be maintained at healthy levels by the body. There are two types of diabetes: type 1 and type 2. Dieticians provide detailed nutrition education from diagnosis and throughout routine follow-up care. They also assess the patient's food choices, meal patterns, and eating behaviours. Diabetes dieticians help patients manage their diabetes. For instance, how to improve their blood glucose level and attain a healthy diet and lifestyle. They also help the patient know how diabetes affects their diets, such as eliminating the consumption of carbohydrates and sugar and only consuming foods high in fat and protein. Typically, dieticians create a diet plan for diabetes patients and adjust or prescribe diabetes medication tailored to their individual needs.

The response also depicted that dieticians have a role in controlling hypertension, and 350 of them gave a Yes response while 60 gave a No answer. High blood pressure happens when the force or pressure of blood pumped through the blood veins is too high. High blood pressure can damage artery walls, heart failure, and vision loss if

ignored. The dieticians typically assist the patients with meal planning to manage their condition, explain the basics of hypertension, provide recipe modifications and provide emotional support.

In addition, dieticians also control kidney disease; this was based on the 310 individuals who gave a Yes response. Kidney diseases can either be chronic or acute. The former is primarily a result of hypertension and uncontrolled diabetes, while the latter is a result of complications arising from injury or severe infections. In both cases, permanent loss of the kidney can happen. People suffering from kidney disease cannot properly regulate their bodies' potassium, protein and sodium levels and filter their blood levels [13]. Dieticians provide medical nutrition therapy to help control kidney diseases and maintain optimal nutrient intake.

In the Intensive Care Unit, the Dieticians is tasked with developing, implementing, and monitoring nutritional strategies and interventions to satisfy the unique need of critically ill patients. From the study, 260 individuals responded that dieticians do not offer nutritional support in the ICU, while 150 responded yes. Patients in the ICU mostly need organ support which complicates their dietary requirements [14]. Their deterioration of nutrition status is associated chiefly with staying in the hospital and ICU for so long, increased risk for infections, and poor functional outcomes.

On the question about whether dieticians follow up on patients after discharge, 209 of the respondents were No, while 201 of the study participants accepted that dieticians play a role after the discharge of a patient. Dieticians check on some of their patients to see if they are following their nutrition plan or not. Some healthcare facilities in the U.S perform telephone follow-ups on their patients [13]. However, most follow-up involves patients suffering from chronic diseases such as kidney diseases. The follow-up is not that strict for those on nutritional plans as a preventive measure.

In addition, on the question of whether people knew that dieticians play a role in controlling gastrointestinal diseases, 240 people responded Yes while 170 said No. Gastrointestinal disease is a digestive or food-induced disorder characterized by pain in the abdominal, bloating, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, and haemorrhoid and Anal fistula. These conditions usually affect the liver, pancreas, stomach, and colon, hindering the absorption of food which causes painful symptoms [14]. Gastroenterology dieticians help the patients analyze their conditions and prescribe the right diet. A study done in 2018 revealed that 90% of 1562 gastroenterologists claimed that implementing a diet plan was more effective than medications for IG [14]. The GI dieticians create a tailored, feasible, adequate nutrition plan that integrates the patient's clinical data, socio-economics lifestyle, and nutritional intake. For instance, patients with a history of GI are screened for over-eating, such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa, which is then considered when making the plan.

On whether the people knew that dieticians have a role in identifying a nutritional problem, 217 participants gave a No response while 193 responded Yes. Nutritional assessment entails collecting data about a patient's medical history, biochemical and clinical records, food security situation, dietary practices, and current treatment to ascertain whether a person or a group is nourished or malnourished. (Under-nourished or over-nourished). The assessment can be done using the ABCD methods: anthropometry, biochemical/biophysical, clinical, and dietary methods [15]. For instance, anthropometry involves measuring the body's weight, proportions, and size. Standard anthropometric measurements are head circumference, height, and skinfold. Skilled facility-based health care providers and dieticians can perform nutrition screening in hospital settings, home-based care, and group meetings.

In the enteral and parental feeding, 308 participants responded No that dieticians do not have a role in this, while 112 responded Yes. Parenteral and enteral dieticians help patients who cannot get the nutrition they require through eating or feeding formula, including fats, electrolytes, minerals, and proteins. Dieticians assess the clients, their families, or close ones to determine what they currently eat [15]. Anyone can receive parental nutrition, either a child or an adult. Individuals can continue to receive parental nutrition until they are fed by a tube or eat enough food on their own. The formula bypasses the gastrointestinal tract process and goes directly into the bloodstream in parental feeding. According to Hickson & Collison (2018), many health care facilities in the U.S administered parental and enteral feeding, with 43% being newborns and children. On the other hand, enteral feeding is food intake via the gastrointestinal tracts, including the mouth, oesophagus, stomach, and intestines [15]. Enteral feeding is usually administered to people with a condition or injury that hinders eating by mouth, but their gastrointestinal is still functioning. Parental and enteral feeding can be administered at home or in health facilities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, nutrition support is a concept that crosses all ages and diseases as medical providers aim to meet the nutrition requirement of people who are incapable of meeting their nutrition needs with or without food intake. The role of dieticians in preventing chronic diseases such as kidney diseases, and diabetes, following up with patients, and administering parental and enteral feeding in reducing diet-related conditions are coherent and clear. Therefore, dieticians play a role in providing optimal management of under-nutrition among all ages in the current world. In addition, nutrition is a vital element of good health; thus, the idea of assessing people's nutrition status as a way of measuring their health status seems ideal. The simple act of providing medical nutritional therapy to patients by assessing their nutritional requirements and developing and implementing nutrition programs can go a long way in

eradicating eating habits related to diseases. More so, the ability to control existing conditions such as diabetes among patients by providing them with a nutritional plan has reduced the money that would have been spent on buying drugs. The results, it is somewhat encouraging because at least more than half of the participants knew about the role of dietitians. Lastly, promptly developing an ideal nutritional plan will help tackle diet-related diseases and reduce death cases.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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