Role of the Dietitian in the Disability Setting

What is a Dietitian?

A Dietitian/Clinical Nutritionist is uniquely qualified to translate scientific information about food and nutrition into practical dietary advice. To work as a Dietitian in Ireland, one must hold a degree in human Nutrition Nutrition and Dietetics or an equivalent qualification. The Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute - INDI is the professional body for Dietitians in Ireland. Membership of this organisation provides an assurance that a Dietitian/Clinical Nutritionist has a recognised clinical qualification.

Role of the Dietitian

Dietitians are responsible for the nutritional management of individuals who are referred to their care. It is well recognised that people with disabilities are at risk of nutritional problems and therefore it is very important that there is access to dietetic services for this group.

In children with Cerebral Palsy, feeding difficulties have been found to affect 60-90% of children. Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder exhibit selective eating and therefore have self-limiting diets which are unbalanced and problematic. Equally, children with conditions such as Down's Syndrome, Spina Bifida and Muscular Dystrophy experience a range of nutritional difficulties including undernutrition, eating, drinking and swallowing (EDS) disorders, constipation, vitamin & mineral deficiencies, bone problems, overweight/obesity, among others. A significant number of those presenting with EDS difficulties go on to require tube feeding.

Close communication with the multidisciplinary team is essential for effective management of nutritional problems amongst this group. As problems are multi-faceted and have knock-on effects on other therapies, the team should include Speech & Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Psychology, etc.

Benefits of Nutritional Intervention

- Improved food and fluid consumption
- Improved nutritional status (e.g. increases in height & weight)
- Improved bowel pattern
- Increased immunity
- Lower rates of hospitalisation
- Improved health and well-being
- Better quality of life
Of note is the fact that overweight/obesity is a serious issue, in particular for children with physical disabilities. This can have an impact on other therapies e.g. ability to mobilise for physiotherapy. Timely nutritional intervention can reduce the risk of overweight and obesity amongst this group, or can at least prevent further increases in weight.

**How to Access a Dietitian**

At present, dietetic services for people with disabilities are very limited in this country, however you can access services via the following routes where available:

- voluntary agency where the person attends
- local community nutrition & dietetic service (HSE)
- acute hospital service where the person attends

In some cases people do seek a service via Dietitians working in a private capacity. Membership of the INDI provides an assurance that the Dietitian is suitably qualified.

**Summary**

Clearly, where dietetic services are available, the Dietitian plays a very important part in the management of nutritional concerns among people with disabilities. The Dietitian is an important member of the multidisciplinary team as nutrition impacts hugely on many aspects of care and well-being.

If you want to see a dietitian in your area please go to our Find a Dietitian section on the homepage www.indi.ie. The contents of this fact sheet have been reviewed by INDI Council. This fact sheet was prepared for the general public. Questions regarding its content and use should be directed to a qualified dietitian.

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