

Nutrition communication: Exciting opportunities for dietitians

One of the things that makes the field of dietetics so exciting is its versatility. Today, the role of the registered dietitian goes far beyond traditional settings. In addition to communicating nutrition information directly to clients and patients, dietitians are reaching a much wider audience through the field of nutrition communication.

Every day, consumers and professionals access nutrition information through a variety of media: television and radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, public health campaigns, web sites, books, newsletters, and brochures, to name a few. Who better to disseminate those messages than registered dietitians?

Because of the public's interest in nutrition, there is a need for dietitians who can ensure that messages are communicated clearly, accurately, and effectively. These nutrition communicators are not only contributing to the public's understanding of nutrition, but also advancing the position of the registered dietitian as "nutrition expert." At the same time, they are enjoying challenging, rewarding, and fulfilling careers as dietitians working in nontraditional roles.

COMBINING NUTRITION EXPERTISE WITH COMMUNICATION SAVVY

Patricia Bannan, MS, RD, is one such communicator. As a freelance journalist and spokesperson in New York, NY, Bannan has produced and reported nutrition news stories for CNN, and has appeared as a guest on NBC's "Today Show." She

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says that dietitians who possess both nutrition knowledge and communications savvy are "a rare breed and in need by public relations agencies, food companies, government agencies, magazine editors, and news directors who want RDs who know both sides of the business."

Amy Myrdal, MS, RD, nutrition communications manager of the Dole Nutrition & Health Program, agrees. She says that for dietitians who communicate well, the opportunities are endless. "The sky's the limit! If you can present yourself well and present nutrition information accurately and in an engaging format, you'll be sought after by a wide variety of organizations."

THE SKILLS TO SUCCEED

Succeeding in the field of nutrition communication requires a special set of skills, including the following:

■ **Broad understanding of basic nutrition science and policy.** This includes not only a good grasp of the basics of nutrition science and policy, but the ability to stay abreast of current developments in nutrition science and to put those findings into the context of the larger body of literature.

■ **Ability to understand and interpret research data.** The results of research studies that involve diet and nutrition often make front-page news. Professionals who can read, understand, and interpret research data are better able to communicate that information clearly and provide context for laypeople. Communicators who are most likely to report the facts correctly are those who have had some academic coursework in epidemiology, biostatistics, and research design.

■ **Excellent written and verbal communication skills.** Clear written and verbal communication is imperative to most every job, and it is particularly important for dietitians working as communicators. Basic skills, including grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, as well

as the ability to put scientific terms into "consumer speak," are vital.

■ **Ability to communicate to diverse groups of people.** "Know your audience" is an oft-used mantra in the field. The readers of a monthly women's magazine are a very different audience than the readers of a nutrition science journal. Yet both groups desire information on the latest news-making nutrition study. The goal of the nutrition communicator is to craft messages based on the same information in ways that will be useful and meaningful to different audiences.

Obtaining These Skills

For dietitians, the challenge in entering the field is often in obtaining skills and experiences in communications. Taking a basic writing course and trying to get published on a small level—such as in your local newspaper or your local dietetic association's newsletter—is a good way to start. To improve your oral communication skills, you can take a public speaking class or join a group such as Toastmasters, where you'll get to practice and improve your speech.

Doing a volunteer or paid internship can also help you build your skills, as can networking with professionals working in the field (the Dietitians in Business and Communications dietetics practice group is a good place to start).

Getting a Degree in Nutrition Communication

For Bannan and Myrdal, the path to becoming successful nutrition communicators began with academic coursework. They earned master's degrees in nutrition communication from Tufts University in Boston—currently the only academic program to award master's degrees specifically in nutrition communication.

As students in the program, they took courses that focused on three main areas of study:

■ nutrition science and policy;

■ research design and analysis (biostatistics, epidemiology); and
■ communications (writing, editing, public speaking, public relations, science journalism, social marketing).

In addition to coursework, they and other Tufts students completed internships at various organizations, including food companies, public relations agencies, media outlets, government agencies, and nonprofit foundations.

Jennifer Otten, MS, RD, another graduate of the Tufts program, credits her internship experiences with giving her the skills to succeed in her present posi-

tion as Communications Director for the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC.

Her advice to dietitians interested in the field of nutrition communications is to be well informed. "Read, read, read! Inform yourself about current events, new technologies, and emerging research—you'll be surprised by how much that knowledge carries over and enhances your skills."

CONCLUSION

As consumers and professionals alike continue to clamor for nutrition informa-

tion, the future is indeed exciting for dietitians working as nutrition communicators. Registered dietitians trained in the field of communications are the best-qualified professionals to ensure that the nutrition messages of today—and tomorrow—are communicated accurately and effectively.

For more information about the Tufts University master's degree program in nutrition communication, call 617-636-6582 or visit <http://nutcomm.tufts.edu>.

Continuing Professional Education Credit Program for American Dietetic Association Members

Despite thousands of news stories and hundreds of pages of scientific studies on the subject, health professionals and consumers alike remain confused about reduced fat foods and ingredients. Here is an opportunity to add to your knowledge of managing dietary fat and earn a CPE credit at the same time.

The International Food Information Council Foundation has developed an ADA-approved CPE on-line program *Fat Replacers: New Choices for Managing Dietary Fat* for dietitians.

What does this program contain?

- Information-packed slide presentation in three formats
- Glossary of ingredients
- CPE Questions

Simply go to <http://ific.policy.net/ADACPE/instructions.vtml?PROACTIVE> to view the program and begin the process of earning one CPE credit hour following your successful completion of the CPE Questions.