



Op-Ed

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December 2, 2016

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Protecting the Health and Safety of Wisconsin: The Role of Registered Dietitians

Wisconsin has one of the premier health care systems in the nation, employing evidence-based medical professionals who practice at the top of their credentials, including Registered Dietitian Nutritionists [dietitian], who strive to provide patients with the best possible care. However, there are political groups in the state who would like to eliminate occupational certification for dietitians. In a report released by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL), dietitians were named as an occupation whose certification should be eliminated, failing to understand the vital role dietitians play in the health and safety of Wisconsin's citizens. Eliminating the dietitian credentialing process would not only lower the quality of health care, but would place patients in danger.

Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDN) are food and nutrition experts who have achieved extensive academic and practice requirements in order to earn and maintain the RDN credential, including completing the minimum of a bachelor's degree- soon to be Master's degree- at an accredited institution. A dietitian is well-educated in biochemistry, nutritional epidemiology, medical nutrition therapy, pathophysiology, public health and sustainable food systems administration. In addition, they must have 1200 hours of supervised dietetic practice in the form of an accredited dietetic internship program and pass the national examination for registered dietitians. Finally, the Dietitian Affiliated Credentialing Board (DACB) must approve the academic preparation for each prospective dietitian ensuring those with the proper education and training are recognized with the RDN credential.

While most understand the role of a physician or nurse, many may not realize the importance a dietitian plays in health care. According to an article published in the Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges in 2010, medical students receive only 19.6 contact hours of nutrition instruction, leaving practicing physicians to rely on dietitians when advising patients on best practices for nutrition-related disease states.

An integral part of the health care team, dietitians provide physicians and patients with advanced nutrition services, including medical nutrition therapy (MNT), administration of enteral and parenteral feedings, analyzing dangerous food and drug interactions, and providing evidence-based nutrition education and counseling. For example, dietitians provide individualized education and counseling to patients with cancer facing months of chemotherapy and radiation.



A dietitian's expertise is not restricted to a hospital, their knowledge and training are utilized across the health care world in departments such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the US Public Health Service, the US Department of Health and Human Services as well as private practice and university medical centers. In these roles, they provide crucial research for food and pharmaceutical companies and for the national dietary guidelines aimed at preventing disease and increasing quality of life.

Groups that support the elimination of the dietitian credentialing process do not realize that in Wisconsin a person may practice within the nutrition field without having the RDN credential. Such individuals do not need a post-secondary education and work within a variety of nutrition-related settings, including food journalism, health promotions, nutritional research, and dietitian assistants. However, if such an individual eventually desired to become a dietitian and practice in an advanced medical setting, they must meet the aforementioned academic requirements.

Dietitians are a vital part of the health care team. Whether they are advising an oncologist on a patient's nutrition or providing recommendations for enteral feedings in a malnourished child, adult, or senior citizen, dietitians are an integral part of the health and safety of Wisconsin. Eliminating the dietitian credentialing process would not only place a patient in danger, but would compromise the quality of care Wisconsin patients expect.

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The Wisconsin Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is an organization of nutrition professionals providing expert food and nutrition services to the residents of Wisconsin. WAND is an affiliate of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, consisting of approximately 1650 nutrition experts commonly known as Registered Dietitian (RD) and Dietetic Technician Registered (DTR).