

person, to further explore the day-to-day experience of being a dietitian and the job-related attitudes that accompany dietetic practice. For dietitians who have completed the survey and wish to participate in the second phase, an option to be contacted by email will be provided.

Devine, C. M., Jastran, M., & Bisogni, C. A. (2004). "On the front line: practice satisfactions and challenges experienced by dietetics and nutrition professionals working in community setting in

New York State." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 104, 787-792.

Dietitians of Canada. (2006). *Ontario dietitian workforce survey suggests looming crisis* [Press release]. September 5, 2007, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.dietitians.ca/news/media.asp?pg=9>.

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Professional Practice Scenario Extra workload Responsibilities

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Our department is chronically understaffed. Now, one of my coworkers is off on an extended sick leave following surgery, and we have been told that she will not be replaced during the 15-20 weeks that she will need to recover. Some of us have been working 2 and 3 extra hours each day, just to keep up.

What are my professional responsibilities in this situation?

Your responsibilities as a regulated health professional do not change when you are faced with workload pressures or under staffing. As a dietitian, your primary responsibility is to act in the best interest of your clients, and to ensure that you practice safely, ethically and competently. There are several principles that you will want to consider in this type of situation.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The professional standards and regulations governing the profession do not change, regardless of the circumstances. This means that you are expected to provide the same competent, safe, and ethical service to each and every

client that you accept to your workload. It is not acceptable to reduce the thoroughness of your assessment, monitoring/follow-up or documentation, in order to see more clients. This is supported by the professional misconduct regulation, which defines professional misconduct as:

5. *Failing to maintain a standard of practice of the profession*
22. *Failing to keep records as required. (Dietetics Act, 1991, O. Reg. 680/93)*

That being said, a dietitian is not required to accept every client, especially where a lack of time and resources will affect client care. As discussed in Chapter 1 of the *Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario* (2008, p 4), a dietitian is demonstrating a professional attitude by refusing to take on new clients if they are unable to provide appropriate service.

PRIORITIZE CLIENTS

The dietitian may need to do some triaging or prioritizing to determine which clients will be seen. Things to consider when determining the priority of clients are risk

management and effectiveness. The phrase, “First, do no harm”, should always be at the back of a dietitian's mind. Clients at greater risk should be given higher priority over those at lower or moderate risk. In a situation where two patients have a similar risk, the dietitian would also need to consider which intervention would do the most good to achieve outcomes. Regardless of how the priority was determined, though, once a client has been added to your caseload, you must provide appropriate care, follow-up and documentation.

EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES

When workload is chronically heavy, it may be a good idea to review some of the practices in your department to alleviate the pressures. Under Standard 1.2 of the *Professional Standards for Dietitians in Canada* (1997), a dietitian has a responsibility to "manage available resources effectively and efficiently in meeting the needs of the client". Involving new technology or other team members may help identify changes in work processes that could help you be more efficient. Changing the way that you do some tasks may allow you to serve more clients. You must ensure however, that you do not sacrifice professional standards in the name of efficiency.

COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR EMPLOYER

In this kind of situation, good communication is important. Make sure your employer is aware of the workload

pressures and advocate on behalf of your clients for increased resources. If the workload pressures persist, you may want to educate your employer about a dietitian's professional responsibility for meeting standards of practice, despite the absence of resources. You may also want to get together with your dietitian colleagues to review your triaging policy, so that everyone is aware and using the same rationale for prioritizing clients. Patient care managers should be aware of the priority in which clients will be seen and how service to their clients will be impacted when RDs are covering for each other. It is also good practice to document when you are not able to see a patient that was referred, as well as any incidents that occur as a result of missed patients. This information might be an important step in advocating for more resources

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, AS WELL

In addition to caring for clients, you also have a responsibility to look after your own health and well-being. It is important to recognize that poorly managed stress can have a negative impact on your health which could lead to poor performance and poor client care. The College has produced several articles addressing stress in the workplace and the potential effect on fitness to practice.

College Resources available at www.cdo.on.ca

Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario (2008). Chapter 1.

“Coping with Stress at Work”. *résumé*, Fall 2005, p. 2.

“When Stress Leads to Incapacity”. *résumé*, Winter 2006, p. 2.

“Fitness to Practice”. *résumé*, Spring 2002, p. 6.

Need to know

The primary responsibility of the dietitian is to act in the best interest of clients and to ensure that the dietetic services offered are safe, ethical and competent.

A dietitian is not required to accept every client but once a client has been added to a caseload, appropriate care, follow-up and documentation must be provided.

The principles to managing workload pressures include:

- Prioritizing clients with risk management and effectiveness in mind.
- Managing resources efficiently.
- Establishing effective communication with your employer.
- Taking care of yourself.