Ethics Opinion: The RD and DTR Are Obligated to Follow Ethical Standards When Writing for the Popular Press

An Ethics Opinion reflects the interpretation or application of the American Dietetic Association (ADA)/Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics by the Ethics Committee in response to a specific ethics issue facing registered dietitians and dietetic technicians, registered in practice. An ethics opinion is an educational guide for practitioner conduct; it is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the issue. The Ethics Committee initiated the following opinion in 2006. The situations described are hypothetical.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The “popular press” is defined as “publications reflecting the taste and interests of the general public” (1). Registered dietitians (RDs) and dietetic technicians, registered (DTRs) have authored material for such popular press as the Washington Post, Miami Herald, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, WebMD, Women’s Day, Shape, ABC News, CNBC, and many more. When writing for the popular press, RDs and DTRs create a valuable connection between the nutrition-conscious public and the profession. Today, “published works” appear in print (such as newspapers, magazines, and product labels), electronically (such as online magazines and blogs), on DVDs/CDs, and in broadcast script-writing. The RD and DTR have a professional responsibility to both society and to their target audience regarding food and nutrition issues. The RD and DTR are committed to objectively translate evidence-based, scientific information to enable their audience to make informed lifestyle decisions. In turn, the RD/DTR garners and increases the level of public trust.

ADA/CDR CODE OF ETHICS AND STRUCTURE

The ADA’s Ethics Committee is a joint committee of the Board of Directors, House of Delegates and Commission on Dietetic Registration. Its purpose is to review, promote, and enforce the American Dietetic Association/Commission on Dietetic Registration Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics (www.eatright.org/codecethics). The committee is also responsible for educating members, credentialed practitioners, students, and the public about the ethical principles of the Code of Ethics. There are 19 principles in the code, which cover the diversity in the dietetic profession (2).

The following principles from the Code of Ethics are applicable for professionals writing for the popular press:

- Principle #1: The dietetics practitioner practices dietetics based on scientific principles and current information.
- Principle #3: The dietetics practitioner presents substantiated information and interprets controversial information without personal bias, recognizing that legitimate differences of opinion exist.
- Principle #6: The dietetics practitioner provides sufficient information to enable clients and others to make their own informed decisions.
- Principle #12: The dietetics practitioner is alert to situations that might cause a conflict of interest or have the appearance of a conflict. The dietetics practitioner provides full disclosure when a real or potential conflict of interest arises.

THE CODE APPLIED TO JOURNALISM

When the RD and DTR write for the popular press they have a responsibility to provide accurate and reliable information so that readers can make informed choices that improve health. When this information is unbiased and factual, readers will then cite the expertise of the RD and DTR. In the American Dietetic Association’s Nutrition and You: Trends 2002 (3), a majority (51% to 55%) of survey respondents from the public believed that RDs are a credible source on topics that included obesity, dietary supplements, food irradiation, and genetically modified foods. It is important that as a profession, we all strive to build upon this good news. The RD and DTR provide public advice through print or electronic communications, and based on professional knowledge, training, and in accordance with standards for practice from the American Dietetic Association (4).

RD/DTR authors need to strive for reporting that reflects accuracy, accountability, independence, balance, and diversity. (5) Good judgment is necessary when the topic has no scientific consensus. Written communication must evaluate published research and established practitioner recommendations to present a truthful story. Readers must know that an article written by an RD or DTR serves consumers and not a particular industry or special interest group.

The public is also not well-served when articles reflect personal beliefs. Overstating a finding can tarnish one’s reputation, give false hope to the reader, and cause unwarranted concern.

A sensationalist or simplistic approach to a diet fad, or one that skews (by omission or commission) the benefits of a diet, is not balanced, and could mislead the reader to unhealthful and inadvertent action.

Although RD/DTRs may not have
control of article titles in some popular press sources, they can always ask to review the article prior to publication. Should the RD/DTR find the title or other editing misleading, he or she may refuse to approve the article, so as not to take part in unethical journalism.

RDs are trained in food science and nutrition. With this comes the responsibility to appropriately translate research when writing for the popular press. The Association of Healthcare Journalists cautions against the use of vague or sensational language when describing outcomes and risks (6). The Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation has published a report on communication procedures and guidelines when reporting food standard and safety risks to the public (7).

Authors need to clarify for the lay reader what the original source of the research is, such as anecdotal, case study, consensus, widely cited research, and others. If no research exists and no nutrition professional group or organization provides a consensus, then the writer also has a responsibility to the reader to clearly report this.

**USING EVIDENCE-BASED GUIDELINES**

Dietetics practice, and ultimately public health, improves by interpreting the quantity and quality of research (8). Evidence-based guidelines and recommendations provide the RD and DTR with information to communicate to the public, thereby maintaining the public’s trust of the RD.

The RD and DTR have the responsibility to make sure that the relevance of research is not lost in translation when writing for the popular press. Likewise, limitations of a study, funding sources, and any conflicts of interest should be disclosed.

Preliminary results from animal studies and Phase 1 clinical trials reporting preliminary data are not the final medical nutrition therapy prescription. These should not be included when writing for the popular press (6). In addition, interpretation of a study considers whether the correct research study design is matched to answer the research question.

When writers are hired to quickly develop written communications from complex research findings, they need to ensure accuracy while under very tight publishing deadlines. A plan for contacting the study director or primary investigator may be necessary so that more details and interpretations not found in a press release or an abstract can be obtained.

If the topic is controversial, writers need to gather information and present research outcomes data from both views. Authors may also seek information from peers with expertise in the topic and who are not affiliated with the researchers reporting new findings.

The goal is always to provide an article that is based in science and valuable to the public. The Harvard School of Public Health—International Food Information Council Foundation project (9) developed a set of questions to guide the communication process:

- Will the communication enhance public understanding of diet and health?
- Have the study findings been put into context?
- Have the study or findings been peer-reviewed?
- Have the important facts about the study been disclosed?
- Has the source of funding been reported?

As a nutrition expert, the RD/DTR writer needs to ensure that consumers have the information and tools they need to make informed food choices for better health. In today’s saturated information environment, one way to reduce the amount of consumer confusion is to use ADA’s Evidence Analysis Library (EAL). The EAL reviews current research on a particular food or nutrition topic, rates the quality of each article, and then forms a concise conclusion. The recommendations and conclusions in the EAL are valid, unbiased, and based on credible science. They are written for the practitioner, who, in turn, can translate that information to the consumer. Information that is pulled together so that alternatives can be weighed and understood will help the consumer make an informed decision.

**DISCLOSING CONFLICTS**

A conflict of interest is a situation in which a professional has a private or personal interest and would gain financially or professionally if the audiences for whom they are writing are influenced to make specific choices.

Consumers want to know what influences studies and the writers that interpret them; the topic of “transparency” is in the public and professional limelight currently, and rightly so.

In general, writers must disclose all interests associated with the content of their articles. Sources of funding and any affiliations of the writer that might cause suspicion can be listed either in the disclosure form provided by the publisher, or on the initiative of the writer. Often, writers provide their disclosures on the same page of the manuscript on which they provide author contact and affiliation information. While much of disclosure information is intuitive on the part of the ethical professional, prudence dictates that the writer review the various types of potential conflict, such as paid speaking engagements, stock holdings, and family employment. One recommended source through which an author can become familiar with transparency requirements is the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (10).

**ETHICAL VIOLATIONS**

Without a doubt, committing fraud by fabricating and/or falsifying data is an obvious and flagrant violation of ethical standards. In addition, plagiarism or duplicate publications are other clear violations of ethical standards (11,12).

When reviewing potential ethical violations regarding publications, the Ethics Committee examines several questions, such as:

- Does the RD or DTR in question have a relevant financial interest that might suggest a conflict of interest or even the appearance of a conflict of interest or bias?
- Is there any indication that the RD or DTR in their professional role has improperly favored any data, information, or company to benefit his or her own financial gains?
- Has the RD or DTR improperly represented the profession or the ADA to outside entities?
- Could the proposed article withstand professional scrutiny?
- Has this information been pub-
published elsewhere? Under what author’s name? Are the similarities of content coincidental?
• Is this an acknowledged duplicate or simultaneous publication made with publisher approval?

CONCLUSION
The American Dietetic Association states that food and nutrition misinformation can have harmful effects on the health and economic status of consumers (8). As communicators of nutrition information, the RD and DTR writing for the popular press bear the same ethical responsibilities as colleagues providing medical nutrition therapy or publishing researchers (13).

Allegations of ethical violations are taken very seriously by ADA and can end or significantly harm a dietetics career and the credibility of the profession as a whole. In contrast, providing accurate, well-integrated nutrition information based on scientific discovery promotes consumer trust and value in the RD and DTR.

References

The Ethics Committee approved the Ethics Opinion on July 17, 2007. The American Dietetic Association authorized republication of the Ethics Opinion in its entirety, provided full and proper credit is given. Requests to use portions of the Ethics Opinion must be directed to ADA Headquarters at 800/877-1600, ext. 4896 or ethics@eatright.org.

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