



# The Ethics of Competence, a Self-Assessment is Key

Tony Peregrin

**M**AINAINING COMPE-  
tence in practice is an ethical responsibility for registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and nutrition and dietetics technicians, registered (NDTRs) to ensure the public receives consistent, high-quality nutrition care. *Competence*, in this context, may be defined in a variety of ways, including “the application and demonstration of appropriate knowledge, skills, and behaviors.”<sup>1</sup> The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy) defines competence as “a principle of professional practice, identifying the ability of the provider to administer safe and reliable services on a consistent basis.”<sup>2</sup> RDNs and NDTRs who exhibit competence typically share the following characteristics and practices: seek out current knowledge; make decisions based on appropriate data and evidence-based research; and communicate effectively with patients, clients, and other professionals.<sup>3,4</sup>

Another definition of competence underscores the importance of “being self-aware and self-critical in day-to-day practice.”<sup>5</sup> In today’s health care environment, credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners typically encounter an extraordinary array of challenges and opportunities related to patient safety, innovative and equitable models of care delivery, value-based care, and other factors. Consequently, RDNs and NDTRs should engage in rigorous self-assessment to determine their level of competence to ensure they are providing appropriate care. Self-assessment is particularly essential if the provider considers a new practice area or implements a novel treatment.<sup>3</sup> In fact, an American Medical Association continuing education module asserts that competence is “developmental and evolves over the professional life cycle.”<sup>5</sup> The module also states that although achieving board certifications is essential, “. . . it is not the whole of competence as an ethical responsibility for physicians.”<sup>5</sup> Physicians as well as RDNs are urged to develop “situation-specific awareness of when they reach the boundaries of their knowledge and skills.”<sup>5</sup>

There are several resources available to RDNs and NDTRs that work in tandem to assure competence and guide practice and performance. These include the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics/Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) Code of Ethics for the Nutrition and Dietetics Profession, the Academy Scope and Standards of Practice articles, and the Professional Development Portfolio Guide with Essential Practice Competencies.<sup>4</sup>

## CODE OF ETHICS

Academy members and CDR-credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners have voluntarily adopted the Code of Ethics to reflect the values

and ethical principles guiding the nutrition and dietetics profession and to set forth commitments and obligations of the practitioner to the public, clients, the profession, colleagues, and other professionals.<sup>6,7</sup>

“The [2018] Code of Ethics has a principle that’s specifically dedicated to competence and professional development in practice,” said Dana Buelsing, MS, CAPM, LSSGB, Manager, Quality Standards Operations, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, referring to principle 1 “Competence and professional development in practice (Non-Maleficence).” All RDNs and NDTRs must abide by standard 1a, which states, “Practice using an evidence-based approach within areas of competence, continuously develop and enhance expertise and recognize limitations.” “I think that the recognized limitations piece is so important for self-evaluation and making sure that you keep on top of your individual scope of practice and build upon your knowledge, skills, and abilities when you are limited,” said Buelsing.

Another facet of principle 1 that is particularly relevant to maintaining competence is standard 1f, which states, “Recognize and exercise professional judgment within the limits of individual qualifications and collaborate with others, seek counsel, and make referrals as appropriate.”<sup>7</sup> “Make sure that you are reaching out to the interprofessional team to seek mentorship when needed or pursue a certificate of training, additional credential, or some other way to demonstrate that you’ve learned necessary skills,” added Buelsing.

“There are emerging topics, and dietitians need to make sure that they have access to all related information and any kind of performance measurement that is centered on that emerging area,” said Sharon M. McCauley, MS, MBA, RDN, LDN, FADA, FAND, Executive Director, Commission

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## SCOPE AND STANDARDS

The Scope of Practice “encompasses the range of roles, activities, and regulations within which nutrition and dietetics practitioners perform.”<sup>8</sup> For RDNs, the scope of practice focuses on food and nutrition and related services, including medical nutrition therapy. For credentialed practitioners, the statutory scope of practice is typically established within the practice act and interpreted and controlled by the agency or board that regulates the practice of the profession in a given state.

Complementary to the Scope of Practice, the Standards of Practice (SOP) and the Standards of Professional Performance (SOPP) are resources designed to assist credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners in identifying, via self-evaluation, their current level of competence and areas to advance practice.<sup>9</sup> The SOP and SOPP Focus Areas for RDNs also guide self-assessment and enhance professional development and advancement in specific areas of practice (eg, diabetes care, oncology nutrition, public health, and community nutrition). Credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners may access *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (JAND)* articles to enhance knowledge and skills related to any of the 17 focus areas for RDNs.<sup>10</sup>

“What we refer to as ‘core standards’—the SOP in Nutrition Care and SOPP—outline minimum competence for RDNs and for NDTRs. They describe the competent level of practice,” said Buelsing. “However, the Academy’s focus area SOP and SOPPs for RDNs have been adapted to reflect 3 levels of practice: competent, proficient, and expert levels. So, you can really build your expertise and competence level as you move through the continuum of advancing professional practice.”

## CDR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO

The CDR Professional Development Portfolio (PDP) Guide with Essential Practice Competencies and the Scope of Practice resources reflect a similar approach for maintaining continued competence and professional accountability. Both pathways underscore the importance of conducting “regular self-

assessments based on self-reflection and feedback from a variety of sources to identify gaps in practice competencies or needs for professional development.”<sup>4</sup>

There are many reasons, as well as benefits, for RDNs and NDTRs to participate in continued professional development. Chief among them is an increased credibility for the individual practitioner, and the profession as a whole, from both health care partners and the public. To this end, RDNs and NDTRs must maintain continuing education credit hours within a 5-year cycle.

“A total of 14 spheres, 65 practice competencies (64 for NDTRs), and 418 performance indicators (374 for NDTRs) were developed to define essential competencies and skills throughout a credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioner’s career,” said McCauley.<sup>11</sup> “Quality indicators from the Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance that identify the competent level for practitioners are used by the Commission to establish the essential practice competencies and to identify the spheres of information.” The spheres guide the personal PDP for each credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioner.

“The Professional Development Portfolio is really a process that encourages credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners to incorporate self-reflection and learning needs assessment for developing a learning plan,” added Buelsing. This process provides a framework to assist RDNs and NDTRs throughout the continuing professional education process.

“The Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance is a resource that helps me to develop my individual PDP plan. I have to evaluate myself: what else do I need to learn? Whether you are trying to advance your career ladder, working towards achievement of an advanced practice or specialist credential, or researching a topic area needed to better inform your patients, the PDP plan is your vehicle to success,” said McCauley.

Failure to maintain competence may result in unintended consequences and professional risks, including the possibility of causing harm to clients or patients.<sup>4</sup>

“If you have ever worked outside your scope of practice or didn’t provide the correct information and you actually harm someone, then this reflects

negatively on the profession and every credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioner,” McCauley said. “Once you’ve caused harm or a negative outcome because you weren’t competent and/or doing something that you weren’t educated or trained to do, and you did not engage in proper self-assessment of your skills—that it is a reflection on all of us as credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners.”

Other professional risks for the RDN or NDTR include losing a job or having their license to practice suspended or revoked entirely due to a complaint reported to a state licensure board, the Ethics Committee of the Academy, and/or the CDR.<sup>12</sup>

## EVALUATING COMPETENCE

“Credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners can engage in self-evaluation and assess their knowledge base in several ways. They can monitor articles published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* and other practice-related journals, as well as the announcements distributed by the Academy and CDR in *Eat Right Weekly* or *The CDR Connection*. I also suggest they read their affiliate or dietetic practice group newsletters, where the Academy makes routine announcements when documents affecting competence are published,” said Buelsing, who also suggested RDNs and NDTRs engage in social media to learn about new competence-related information.

The Academy’s Scope of Practice Decision Algorithm provides a process for RDNs or NDTRs to critically evaluate their knowledge, skills, and experience to determine whether the desired activity (eg, role, service, or intervention) is within an individual’s scope of practice by answering a series of questions.<sup>13</sup>

Soliciting feedback on performance from an employer, peers, clients, mentors, and business partners is another essential self-assessment component for maintaining competence. Moreover, a credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioner is ethically bound to discuss a potentially incompetent practice issue with the colleague in question if the situation arises.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental strategy for identifying gaps in practice competencies is to develop a keen sense of self-awareness. Observing critical points along a career path (such as those reaching the mid-career point

or considering alternate practice settings) that may warrant acquiring new competencies is advised, as is recognizing other factors, such as those related to wellness or the work environment, which could influence the practitioner's skills or knowledge.<sup>14</sup> For example, changes in mental or emotional wellness, feelings related to burnout or job dissatisfaction, and personal situations that heighten feelings of stress or anxiety could impact an RDN's and NDTR's ability to employ the skills and competencies necessary to act in the patient or client's best interest.<sup>14</sup> Using self-reflection to evaluate competence can raise awareness and assist nutrition and dietetics practitioners with identifying opportunities for improvement.<sup>4</sup>

### CASE SCENARIOS DEMONSTRATING A NEED FOR ENHANCED COMPETENCE

The following 3 examples demonstrate the need for credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners to maintain competence in practice. (It is relevant to note that both the Core SOP and SOPP articles and the focus area articles include role examples for using the SOP and SOPP in practice.)

Alicia is an RDN who has been counseling patients with diabetes in an outpatient clinic for the past 10 years. She recently applied to a different position in a nephrology unit, where she will be focusing mainly on renal nutrition. Because this focus area is different from her current expertise, Alicia determines she must identify opportunities to update her knowledge and skills in this area. She evaluates the available resources, then purchases and completes the Academy's Certificate of Training program in Chronic Kidney Disease Nutrition Management. Alicia has demonstrated that she is willing to assume responsibility and accountability for competence in practice.

Chris is a clinical RDN who was recently promoted to a managerial role. He establishes a mentoring relationship with an experienced manager at a different facility to develop his leadership, management, financial, and human resources skills. As a result of

identifying and addressing a learning need, Chris has enhanced his competence as an executive professional.

Natalie is an NDTR exploring how to become a health and wellness coach. She reaches out to her colleague, who identifies competencies Natalie needs to strengthen before practicing as a health and wellness coach. Natalie researches and decides to purchase and complete the Academy's Certificate of Training in Health and Wellness Coaching. She then participates in a National Board for Health & Wellness Coaching—approved training program to study for and take the examination to become a National Board-Certified Health & Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC).<sup>15</sup> She has demonstrated a willingness to assume responsibility for competence in practice.

### CONCLUSIONS

At all stages of their careers, credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners are ethically compelled to maintain competence in practice. The Academy and CDR have multiple resources that are intended to guide the practice and performance of RDNs and NDTRs in all settings. These resources include the Code of Ethics for the Nutrition and Dietetics Profession, Academy Scope and Standards of Practice articles and resources, and the Professional Development Portfolio Guide with Essential Practice Competencies. Engaging in critical self-assessment, obtaining feedback from peers and other respected professionals, adhering to evidence-based practice, and obtaining relevant education, training, and/or recognized certification are all successful strategies for ensuring that skills, knowledge, and judgment best serve their patients and clients.

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