Dietitian, Dietician, or Nutritionist?

THE TERMS DIETITIAN VS nutritionist and the correct spelling of dietitian have been ever-evolving issues for our profession. To trace back the origins of these issues we would need to start before the founding of the American Dietetic Association (ADA) in 1917. The word *dietetics* was included in the 1839 *Dunglison Medical Lexicon* and defined as "a branch of medicine comprising the rules to be followed for preventing, relieving, or curing disease by diet."[1] In the 1870s, cooking schools started to be developed, laying the ground work for the dietetics profession in the United States. Graduates of these cooking schools were often called "dietists."[1] Moving forward to 1899, the word *dietitian* was coined at the Lake Placid Conference on Home Economics.[2] These women also created the first definition of a dietitian: "persons who specialize in the knowledge of food and can meet the demands of the medical profession for diet therapy."[2] Records of these early meetings noted that in a discussion by Mary Swartz Rose and Lenna F. Cooper, the terms *dietist* and *dietician* were both used.[1] In 1917, when the American Home Economist Association meeting was cancelled because of World War I, Lenna Cooper and Lulu Graves decided there should be an opportunity for the dietitians in the country to meet and discuss the issues facing the hospital dietitian—and the American Dietetic Association was founded. The dietitian's role continued to expand into a wide variety of job opportunities in social service organizations and institutions, child care programs, and as cafeteria managers in clubs, hotels, and schools. A new title arose around 1920, and some dietitians were called *nutrition workers*. Mary Swartz Rose noted that this term was awkward, and it gradually became *nutritionist*.[1] The correct or preferable spelling of *dietitian* has been a long-standing matter for the profession of dietetics. In 1930, the ADA executive committee at the 13th Annual Meeting considered a variety of issues, one being the official spelling of *dietitian* with a "t"—and this was the spelling that was adopted.[1]

In 1940, an ADA committee was formed to update the definition of *dietitian*, which became a person "who had college training in the science of nutrition and management and is proficient in the art of feeding individuals and groups." A *nutritionist* in a public agency was a "qualified, professionally trained person who directs or carries on a program of activities dealing with the application of scientific knowledge of nutrition to the prevention of disease and the promotion of positive health."[1]

The spelling of *dietitian* continued to be controversial. In 1954, the *ADA Courier* mentioned that *Time Magazine* reported "the word dietitian is among the 20 most misspelled words."[1] Moving forward into the early 1960s, dietetic associations, under the auspices of the International Committee of Dietetic Associations (ICDA), worked together to standardize information about dietitians under the International Standard Classification of Occupations. When the International Labour Office confirmed the dietetic profession's classification in 1967, it also adopted the spelling *dietitian* at the request of the international dietetic community.[3] Still to this day some dictionaries list *dietician* as an accepted alternate, but, as noted, the official spelling dating back to 1930 still stands.

Confusion continued regarding the role of the *dietitian* and *nutritionist*. In 2010, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics began exploring the option of offering the *registered dietitian nutritionist* (RDN) credential. The 2013 joint meeting of the major organizational units (Commission on Dietetic Registration, Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics, Council on Future Practice, Education Committee, and Nutrition and Dietetics Educators and Preceptors DPG) supported moving forward with the use of the RDN credential. Incorporating nutritionist into the RD credential highlights that "all registered dietitians are nutritionists, but not all nutritionists are registered dietitians."[4]

As we enter the month of March, the Academy celebrates the eighth Registered Dietitian Nutritionist Day[5] and acknowledges the contributions and expertise of registered dietitian nutritionists as *the* food and nutrition experts.

*This article was written by **Wendy Marcason**, RDN, of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' Knowledge Center Team, Chicago, IL. Academy members can contact the Knowledge Center by sending an e-mail to knowledge@eatright.org.*

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.12.024

References

1. Cassell JA. *Carry the Flame: The History of the American Dietetic Association*. Chicago, IL: American Dietetic Association; 1990.
2. South ML. Reflections of a diamond: 75 years for ADA. *J Am Diet Assoc*. August 1993;93(8):892-896.
3. Sharp M. The "c" in dietitians—A long history and fading future (maybe). *Dietetics Around the World*. Newsletter from the International Confederation of Dietetics Associations. 2010; vol 17, issue 2. http://www.internationaldietetics.org/Newsletter/Vol17Issue2/Feature-Article/The-c-in-dietitians-a-long-history-and-fading-futu.aspx. Accessed December 16, 2014.
4. Commission of Dietetic Registration (CDR). RDN Credential—Frequently Asked Questions. http://www.cdrnet.org/news/rdncredentialfaq. Accessed December 18, 2014.
5. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetic's Registered Dietitian Nutritionist Day. http://www.eatright.org/NNM/content.aspx?id=5189#.VJMrkV4DA. Accessed December 18, 2015.

Related Resources

The Academy's History *Journal* Collection Accessed December 18, 2014 http://www.andjrnl.org/content/amh

National Nutrition Month 2015 is "Bite into a Healthy Lifestyle" Accessed December 18, 2014 www.eatright.org/nnm

© 2015 by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.