

Analysis of nutrition content within education programmes and nutrition requirements of accreditation standards and curricula for healthcare professionals in Ireland

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Nutrition plays a key role in health promotion and disease prevention⁽¹⁾. Nutrition care is the application of nutrition knowledge by health care professionals (HCPs) to improve nutrition behaviour in patients and promote health⁽²⁾. Internationally, nutrition has been inadequately represented in medical education accreditation standards and curricula⁽³⁾, however, the level of nutrition education in training programmes, accreditation standards and curricula for HCPs in Ireland is currently unknown.

The aims of this research were to analyse the level of nutrition content in third level education programmes for HCPs (phase 1); and to review the nutrition education requirements within accreditation standards and curricula for HCPs in Ireland (phase 2).

Reference to nutrition was considered both explicitly i.e. direct reference to nutrition e.g. 'dietary guidelines', 'diet'; and implicitly i.e. indirect reference to nutrition e.g. terms such as 'food hygiene' and 'breastfeeding'⁽³⁾. During phase 1, an online search was conducted that identified 25 HCPs for which third level education programmes were available in Ireland at the time of data collection in February 2022. Programme webpages were evaluated for reference to nutrition within the programme modules and learning outcomes, programme leaders were also emailed to seek further information where necessary. For phase 2, accreditation standards and curricula were available for 16 HCPs. A content analysis was carried out for reference to nutrition explicitly or implicitly within these documents. Phase 1: Out of 155 HCP education programmes assessed, 48% (n = 75) contained implicit reference (indirect reference; wellbeing, breastfeeding, biology), and 14% (n = 22) contained explicit reference (direct reference; nutrition, diet, health) to nutrition. However, 37% (n = 58) of HCP education programmes contained no reference to nutrition. Phase 2: 19% (n = 3) of the accreditation standards or curricula for HCPs referenced nutrition explicitly, this included dietitians, general practitioners and psychotherapists. Whereas the other HCPs' (n = 13) accreditation standards or curricula contained implicit reference to nutrition.

Overall, this research demonstrates a paucity of nutrition education in HCPs' training programmes in Ireland. In addition, there is a lack of nutrition education requirements within accreditation standards and curricula for HCPs in Ireland. These findings are consistent with international research⁽³⁾. Formal integration of nutrition in HCPs' education is essential to equip HCPs to play a meaningful role in the provision of nutrition care.

References

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