

9. Quality assurance: practice improvement and reorientation is required

As stated earlier, the focus of workforce development should not dim once graduates enter the workforce but instead work to ensure that competencies developed can be efficiently applied to address and solve public health nutrition problems. Workforce quality assurance systems such as registration systems linked to continuing professional development and ethical practice are widely used across the health professions, and have been developed to support workforce development in public health nutrition. Many readers will be familiar with the development of a registration system for public health nutritionists by the Nutrition Society in the UK. Statutory registration is a feature of public health nutrition workforces such as those in Canada and the USA. The utility of, and need for, a global system of recognition and quality assurance for public health nutritionists will be important questions and challenges for the newly constituted World Public Health Nutrition Association.

10. Dissemination, sharing and debate are needed

The final challenge to readers is to participate in and encourage ongoing dialogue between academics, practitioners, communities and employers, to share intelligence relevant to effective capacity building via workforce development. Public health nutrition research and strategic intent has limited utility until it is effectively applied to improve public health. Practitioners are therefore

critical capacity determinants for public health nutrition action. The nexus between academia and practice needs ongoing development, to enhance the effectiveness of the workforce and improve public health. Observations from both sides of the fence suggest we can all do this much better.

Public Health Nutrition is an ideal medium to facilitate this debate and dialogue, prompted in this issue by a number of workforce development papers from Canada, the USA, South Africa and Australia.

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In this issue

Workforce development is a major capacity-building strategy of great relevance to public health nutrition, yet little is published on this topic to inform policy, practice and future research. In this workforce development themed issue, a number of papers are presented that go some way to addressing this gap in scholarship and hopefully provide an impetus for more active dissemination of workforce development research and practice through this journal.

Fox *et al.*⁽¹⁾ present the results of a situational assessment of public health nutrition practice in Canada that has informed the development of a national workforce development strategy. This multifaceted study consisted of literature review, key informant interviews, a political, economic, environmental, social and technological (PEEST) factor analysis and a consensus meeting. Central to this

approach has been the active engagement and participation of multiple stakeholders, which is critical to effective workforce development.

South of the border in the USA, which has arguably one of the world's largest and most developed public health nutrition workforces, Haughton and George⁽²⁾ describe the challenges for workforce development based on a long history and significant national investment in public health nutrition programmes. Key messages from this paper include the importance and recognition of the need for workforce monitoring and the dynamic nature of the workforce that needs to change in response to changing work environments and needs, particularly emphasizing the effect of changing government policy and resource allocation on influencing workforce practices.

Continuing south of the equator, Steyn and Mbhenyane⁽³⁾ review and report on the considerable current and predicted public health nutrition workforce needs in South Africa. This analysis includes consideration of sociodemographics, burden of disease, government policy and programmes, and the nature of the existing workforce, and describes national strategic plans for workforce development.

There is a dearth of literature that can be used to inform workforce development strategy planning and implementation. This may explain the narrow focus of workforce development that has traditionally been biased to considerations of training (workforce preparation) rather than workforce organization, management or quality assurance. In an effort to address this limitation, Palermo and McCall⁽⁴⁾ present a qualitative study exploring the role of mentoring in public health nutrition workforce development in Australia, based on reflection and experience of advanced-level practitioners. This study points to the importance of mentoring programmes and work-embedded learning as strategic opportunities to develop competency development pathways for public health nutritionists.

Each of these contributions illustrates the diversity and complexity of challenges for public health nutrition

workforce development, even among countries such as Canada, the USA and Australia with similar cultural, socio-economic and political structures. More research, dissemination and collaborative dialogue is needed on workforce development at a global level, particularly in developing economies, without which public health nutrition capacity will be constrained by ineffective and inadequate workforce development.

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