

# SCOPE OF PRACTICE-SUPPORT STAFF IN NUTRITION & DIETETIC SERVICES

## Introduction and Background

The key roles of dietitians are to contribute to the promotion of health, the prevention of ill health and the application of medical nutrition therapy for acute and chronic conditions. This optimisation of nutrition in populations and individuals occurs in a variety of settings; from population based prevention programs, community care, or food service through to settings such as acute care, rehabilitation, mental health and aged care.

The roles of dietitians are constantly changing and diversifying in response to a highly changeable work environment<sup>1</sup>. Workload demands on dietitians continue to increase whilst resources to meet increasing demands remain finite<sup>2</sup>. As with other allied health professions, the use of support staff in nutrition and dietetic services offers opportunities to provide cost efficient and cost effective services, while at the same time achieving continual improvement in the quality of client care<sup>3-9</sup>.

The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) has historically set standards for best practice, fostered professionalism and provided the basis for internal clinical governance mechanisms for the protection of members and the public. These standards are specified in the Code of Professional Conduct, which is available from the DAA website. DAA also has a position statement on the Scope of Dietetic Practice Framework<sup>10</sup> for dietitians. Members who are also Accredited Practising Dietitians (APD) have demonstrated commitment to ongoing training and education and to compliance with the DAA's guidelines for best practice. Refer to the DAA website [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au) for further information.

It is important that support staff in nutrition and dietetic services work within a scope of practice and within the limits of their training. A scope of practice paper is beneficial to explain to nutrition support staff and their supervisors the roles that are suitable to be conducted. Roles are continuously evolving in health and it is imperative to ensure scope of practice documents continue to reflect the current roles and scope. The *Scope of Practice- Support Staff in Nutrition and Dietetic Services* document was developed in 2007. A review was undertaken in 2016 to ensure this scope of practice document is valid for the current work force and role of support staff in nutrition and dietetics services.

This revised document defines the scope of practice for nutrition support workers (i.e. nutrition assistants, dietitian assistants and general allied health assistants) who provide assistance to dietitians.

This document provides a framework to guide dietitians and external organisations (e.g. insurance and employing organisations) in determining whether particular activities can be accepted as part of safe practice for these support staff. The training requirements, code of conduct for nutrition support workers, and operational and professional supervision requirements of these staff are also included within this document.

This current document should be considered in conjunction with a number of national, state and territory based documents addressing the Allied Health Assistant workforce. These documents include further information on definitions, scope of practice, roles and responsibilities, position descriptions, supervision and delegation. A number of these documents are listed as Further Readings in Appendix I.

## **Definition of Support Staff**

The titles used to describe nutrition and dietetic support positions have changed during the past decades. Prior to 1991, titles of “diet aide” and “menu monitor” were commonly used to describe these support positions. “Dietetic technician” emerged in 1991 followed by “nutrition assistant” and “dietetic assistant” in the late 1990s. “Dietary Support worker” has been a more recently used term<sup>11</sup>. “Dietitian Assistant” has also been more recently used. Along with title changes, the scope of practice of these support positions and the supervision models have also evolved. As changes to models of health care and dietetic roles occur, continued evolution of the roles of these support positions can also be expected.

Whilst this document focuses on nutrition support workers it should also be considered in the context of broader Allied Health Assistant workforce developments. A number of states within Australia have policies and guidelines that explore the potential for the Allied Health Assistant to address challenges in meeting growing healthcare workforce demands. These resources provide a valuable adjunct to understanding the governance required around defining and managing the scope of practice for Allied Health Assistants.

A definition for support workers (i.e. nutrition and dietetic support workers, nutrition assistants, dietetic assistants etc.) has been provided in the *Urbis Dietitian and Nutrition Assistant Workforce Mapping* report (2015)- “dietetic support workers are health care workers with the knowledge and skills to support professionally qualified dietitians in delivering nutritional care programs to clients”<sup>11</sup>. Although nutrition support workers may undertake a range of roles in their workplace they spend more than 75% of their work time performing nutrition and dietetic support tasks<sup>12</sup>.

Designated nutrition support worker roles do not exist in all facilities, for example in aged care, rural and smaller facilities. In these settings the tasks of nutrition support workers are still important and need to be integrated within the role of other positions such as general Allied Health Assistants, where appropriate skills can be demonstrated and governance and reporting mechanisms established.

The role of the nutrition support worker at a local level will be influenced by a range of factors including their training, knowledge and competence; workplace policies; the type of work setting and model of care; supervision model; and level of patient acuity.

## **Scope of Practice**

As the scope of professional practice within the dietetic profession in Australia is rapidly expanding, more dietitians are now being employed in a variety of settings. These include but are not limited to education

and research, corporate, government, health promotion, community care and residential care. The specific roles undertaken by nutrition support workers will be dependent on the type of nutrition and dietetic service and access to support from the supervising dietitian.

Acknowledging these variations, DAA proposes that the scope of practice for nutrition support workers should be broad enough to cover the variations in client needs and care settings, and that position titles and position descriptions should reflect the needs of the individual client population and care setting. Scope of practice decision-making must be embedded in a robust clinical governance, risk management and regulatory framework at each workplace.

A nutrition support worker may undertake adjunctive tasks to support the delivery of nutrition and dietetic services as delegated by the supervising dietitian. However, there are some roles which may only be undertaken by a dietitian. These include:

- Making clinical decisions at policy, system and individual level;
- Communicating about nutrition diagnosis and nutrition treatment plans with the patient or carers<sup>13</sup>;
- Conducting assessments (including needs assessment, clinical assessment, nutritional assessment etc.);
- Interpreting data and referrals;
- Formulating or modifying goals and plans for the client;
- Explaining the rationale, risks and options of nutrition and dietetic care or services;
- Follow up, discharge planning and/or evaluation of nutrition and dietetic services.

Nutrition support workers may undertake a range of clinical and process tasks. The list below includes the roles that nutrition support workers can undertake that are listed and defined in the *Consensus Statement of NSW Health Nutrition and Dietetics Network Group on the Roles and Tasks Undertaken by Dietitian Assistants (2015)*<sup>12</sup> as well as some additional roles identified as suitable by DAA. Nutrition support workers can:

- Apply clinical nutrition/therapeutic diet protocols as delegated;
- Assist in nutrition and dietetic service operations (e.g. printing resources, assisting with simple anthropometry such as weight and height and booking outpatient appointments);
- Assist the clinical dietitian with implementation and monitoring of prescribed nutrition care plans, including discharge planning;
- Assist nutrition and dietetic services in quality improvement activities and research;
- Assist with nutrition support for patients with, or at risk of malnutrition;
- Assist with patient safety (e.g. allergens, texture, food safety);
- Carry out daily statistics;
- Carry out other nutrition related roles appropriate to the setting (e.g. assist with special food preparation and assist with group programs);
- Communicate with relevant health service personnel regarding patient therapeutic diet requirements;
- Facilitate access to food and fluids;
- Facilitate and monitor orders to patient food services, as required by the local system and

protocols;

- Manage the logistics of and coordinate the provision of enteral feeds, commercial oral nutrition supplements and infant feeding formulas;
- Participate in continuing knowledge development;
- Participate in risk screening (malnutrition screening, identify and report factors that place patients at nutritional and hydration risk during their admission, other relevant screening programs);
- Support the function of an electronic diet and menu management information system;
- Support the provision of nutrition advice/education;
- Training and supervision of lower level and/or less experienced nutrition support workers and student allied health assistants or support workers.

Note: whilst nutrition support workers may contribute to the training and supervision of support worker students, these staff will benefit from support in developing skills in teaching in the work place environment (orientation requirements, teaching on the run) and developing an understanding of adult learning principles.

## **Code of Conduct**

Support workers in nutrition and dietetic services must:

- Respect the rights, autonomy and dignity of all individuals;
- Recognise the extent and limitations of their skills and knowledge and undertake only those tasks (as outlined in the competency task list) for which they have been assessed as competent to perform;
- Respect the confidentiality and security of client information according to relevant state legislation and employer policy;
- Co-operate and communicate in a timely and courteous manner to their supervising dietitian, colleagues and other health care providers and agencies in the best interests of the client and the community;
- Act in a manner which demonstrates commitment to ethical practice and in line with the organisations statement of ethical practice;
- Recognise the position and professional accountability of the supervising dietitian.

There are a number of state and territory Code of Conduct documents for unregistered health professionals, which may be applicable to nutrition support workers.

## **Work settings**

Nutrition support staff work in a range of work settings, under a number of models of care. Some work environments include; acute services, sub-acute services, community, residential and food service environments. The work of nutrition support staff occurs in an ever-changing environment. The nutrition support worker's role will therefore vary depending on their particular work setting.

Whilst numerous work environments and models of care exist, there will never be one single description for the role of nutrition support workers. The role will be specific to the local setting and model of care.

It will be impacted by the location, patient acuity and available food service model. A list of potential tasks for a nutrition support worker are described previously in the document. Weaving these tasks into a coherent position description will identify the role, supervision and governance of nutrition support workers in their setting.

## **Position Descriptions**

The position description is a vital document for all nutrition support workers. The task list above can be used as a guide however it is up to each organisation to consider the context, skills, training, knowledge and support required for someone to undertake a role. The position description should clearly identify what roles the support staff in an organisation can undertake.

The position description can also help clarify the role of the nutrition support worker. There has been significant debate and discussion around roles, boundaries, reporting lines and legal delegation of nutrition support workers in the past. This lack of clarity has inhibited the development of collaborative working relationships between dietitians and nutrition support staff<sup>11</sup>.

When identifying tasks for nutrition support workers it is important to differentiate between allocated and delegated tasks. Allocated tasks are everyday tasks that require little specific direction from the supervisor and are included in the position description. The nutrition support worker is therefore responsible and accountable for these tasks<sup>13</sup>. Delegated tasks are those that are delegated to the nutrition support worker by the supervising dietitian, who also oversees the delivery and outcome of these tasks<sup>13</sup>. Training is required for task delegation for both the nutrition support worker and dietitian.

## **Supervision**

Tasks that involve any level of clinical decision-making require appropriate training, qualifications and clinical supervision<sup>14</sup>. Allied Health Assistants (including nutrition support workers) are employed under the supervision of an allied health professional and the supervision provided may be direct, indirect or remote<sup>13</sup>. All types of supervision require formalised processes for two way reporting, professional support and communication, whether this be in person or using technology<sup>15</sup>.

The DAA recommends that qualified health professionals who have achieved a qualification in nutrition and dietetics (i.e. a dietitian) should be responsible for both operational and professional management of nutrition support positions in all healthcare facilities and settings.

As dietitians are responsible for ensuring the quality of nutrition care to the client or group, employing organisations should ensure that dietitians maintain accountability for appropriate delegation of nutrition and dietetic support tasks to nutrition support workers. The provision of professional supervision for nutrition support staff will ensure the maintenance of standards of nutrition care. Any nutrition support worker undertaking dietetic support tasks must have structured dietetic professional supervision.

Nutrition support workers who take patient meal orders should have supervision by a dietitian. This is to ensure information regarding food intake, issues with meal consumption and other clinically important information is communicated to a dietitian<sup>11</sup>. Despite the considerable improvements in technology based menu systems, which offer a degree of safety and minimisation of clinical risk, there is still patient interaction performed, potentially leading to clinical decisions. Dietetic supervision is therefore still required for nutrition support workers completing menu orders.

DAA recognise that not all facilities employ a full time dietitian however, supervision structure remains important. Provided that consideration is given to the issues of client acuity, intensity of nutrition intervention, length of stay and access to a dietitian, DAA supports a shared supervision model in facilities that do not employ a clinical dietitian. In these facilities, the dietitian (e.g. consulting dietitian) would provide clinical supervision to these nutrition support positions, while other positions could be used for the operational management. Should a sole dietitian leave a position, it is important that risk management and contingency strategies be put in place by management to enable nutrition support workers to continue working with the support and supervision of a dietitian.

DAA acknowledges that supervision and management of nutrition support staff requires a level of knowledge and skill to ensure quality supervision and safe practice. DAA recommends that employing organisations ensure appropriate processes are in place to achieve these outcomes through professional development and mentoring programs for supervising dietitians.

### **Education Pathway / Skills and Competencies:**

Below is an example list of competency standards for nutrition support workers that have been designed using the competencies in the Certificate IV Allied Health Assistants Nutrition and Dietetics Skill Set Units<sup>16</sup> and relevant competencies from the framework for entry-level dietitians<sup>17</sup>. The competency standards can be used to guide the work undertaken by nutrition support workers.

#### **Competency standards for nutrition and dietetic support staff**

Domain 1 Demonstrates safe and effective practice within ethical and legal frameworks

- Recognises own practice and scope of practice limitations and seeks assistance and further training as necessary
- Exercises duty of care in accordance with relevant codes of conduct, ethical requirements and other accepted protocols
- Accepts responsibility for own actions and demonstrates integrity, honesty and fairness including seeking and responding appropriately to feedback.
- Reflects on own culture, values and beliefs and works respectfully with individuals, groups and/or populations from different cultures
- Accepts responsibility for and manages, implements and evaluates own personal health and wellbeing including complying with personal hygiene and food safety standards

Domain 2 Supports the health of individuals, groups and/or populations to achieve nutrition outcomes

- Identifies the nutrients and food group serves recommended for good health for client groups
- Assists with planning and evaluating meals and menus to meet recommended dietary guidelines
- Identifies food-related cultural and religious needs of client groups
- Provides nutrition support services for at risk clients under supervision of a dietitian and organisation protocols
- Documents client information according to accepted standards
- Assists with nutrition risk screening
- Assists with implementation of therapeutic diets

- Assists with the monitoring and modification of meals and menus according to individualised plans
- Reports on client status and acceptance of individualised plans
- Supports food services in menu and meal order processing, implementing nutrition support services and monitoring client satisfaction with food services
- Assists with the provision of basic and scripted dietary and nutrition information/education to individuals and groups

Domain 3 Collaborates with clients and stakeholders within scope of practice.

- Communicates appropriately with individuals, groups, organisations and communities from various cultural, socio-economic, organisational and professional backgrounds
- Collaborates within teams effectively and promotes effective inter-relationships between key stakeholders – dietetic services

### **Training and Competency Standards**

Competence encompasses meeting certain minimum requirements or standards to be able to perform the required activities of a particular profession in the workplace<sup>18</sup>. The completion of nationally recognised training by all staff working in positions providing support to nutrition services is strongly supported by DAA. Completion of training should be undertaken irrespective of the type or location of the healthcare setting, and that training should relate to the core competencies (as per the list of competency tasks supported by DAA). Core competencies for nutrition and dietetic support workers have been incorporated into the Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance (Nutrition and Dietetic)<sup>16</sup>. On-the-job training and other training that does not include the assessment of core competencies is not considered by DAA as adequate training for these positions.

Higher complexity tasks require advanced or additional skills which may not be covered under the core competencies of the Certificate IV Allied Health Assistance (Nutrition and Dietetics). These skills and knowledge would need to be addressed through an organisation based competency training package and subsequent credentialing may be required by a facility if the task is out of scope of practice. This program should include a Competency Standard and an Assessment Tool that documents evidence of competency by workplace observation, written responses, and oral appraisals. Ongoing revision and self-directed learning, following the provision of competency training, as well as supervision by a dietitian is essential to maintaining competency.

For other positions, such as generic Allied Health Assistants, nutrition support competencies should be included in the Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance<sup>16</sup>. This provides opportunity for workers employed in non-nutrition specific support positions to expand their skills and knowledge base and be able to undertake nutrition support tasks under the direction of a dietitian.

Ongoing professional development by support workers in nutrition and dietetic services and generic allied health assistant positions should also be encouraged and supported by their supervising dietitian.

### **Guiding principles**

Nutrition support workers should be guided by the following principles:

- A Dietitian who is also an APD is committed to ongoing training and education and to complying with the DAA guidelines for best practice where available<sup>10</sup>. They are therefore most qualified to select the nutrition support tasks for delegation to nutrition support workers and are considered the most appropriate healthcare professional to supervise the tasks of nutrition support workers
- Dietitians work towards achieving justice in the provision of healthcare for all people<sup>19</sup>, and therefore support workers should similarly work towards this goal
- Dietitians accept responsibility for all treatment provided by others acting under their supervision<sup>19</sup>, and therefore nutrition support workers should work within the accepted scope of practice for these positions. While dietitians are responsible for task delegation, nutrition support workers are accountable for their actions and should only undertake tasks that have been properly delegated and that they are competent to undertake.
- Dietitians act in accordance with relevant legislation and seek authorisation from employer or insurance provider if in private practice<sup>10</sup>. Nutrition support workers should also work within relevant legislation and workplace policies and procedures

## Summary

DAA acknowledges the need for the delineation of the scope of practice for support workers in nutrition and dietetic services and recognises that as the role of dietitians continues to expand, so too does the potential for the evolution of the roles of nutrition support workers.

DAA also recognises that although there are several models for the supervision of tasks delegated to the nutrition support workers, professional supervision of any nutrition competency tasks undertaken by these nutrition support workers should be performed by a health professional with nutrition and dietetic qualifications. The model of utilising nutrition support workers should recognise the distinct roles and responsibilities of supervising dietitians and the adjunct roles and responsibilities of the nutrition support workers in these services.

Ultimately, dietitians are responsible for all interventions provided for clients under their nutrition care <sup>20</sup>.

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## Appendix I- Further Reading

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