Dealing with ethical dilemmas in dietetics practice

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Objectives

1. Enumerate and describe principles for ethical decision making
2. Apply ethical principles to practice situations
History of Ethics

Began thousands of years ago

Prominent in major religions (notion of “right and wrong”)

Prominent in the teachings of philosophers (notion of “do no harm”)

A Code of Ethics and the will to enforce it is a necessary component for an occupation to become a profession

Prestigious universities offer PhD degrees in ethics

PubMed lists 235 journals in the ethics category
Ethics or Law

Ethics provide guidelines for behavior and, in dietetics, may be enforced by a professional organization. Not all ethical principles are formalized into law. (e.g., the common principle supporting the need to remain current with the latest research and innovation in a profession)

Laws codify social norms and are enforced through the justice system. Not all laws are considered ethical. In fact, depending upon the government, there may be many unethical laws (e.g. those supporting discrimination against certain groups)
Ethical Codes for Dietitians

International Code of Ethics and Good Practice

Dietitians Association of Australia Statement of Ethical Practice

New Zealand Dietitians Board

Code of Ethics for The Dietetic Profession In Canada

British Dietetic Association

Nutritionists Dietitian Association of the Philippines

Japan Dietetic Association Code of Ethics

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Code of Ethics for Dietetics Practitioners
One Dietitian’s View of Ethics

We are good people
We are trained as scientists
We seek a single, correct answer
We deal with questions that have yes/no answers
We strive to do the right thing; to follow the rules
Thus, we don’t really need to pay much attention to ethics
So, where’s the problem?

Our profession has a code of ethics

Our patients and clients may have beliefs that conflict with our code of ethics. They will definitely have their own ideas of what is right or wrong for them.

Deciding what’s right may not be so simple; there might not be a single, right answer.
Ethical Principles

Autonomy
- Respect individuals as autonomous agents
- Protect persons with diminished autonomy
Ethical Principles

Nonmaleficence
  – First, do no harm
Ethical Principles

Beneficence
– Then, do good
Ethical Principles

Justice
– Fairness to all
Situation One

A senior nurse manager approaches a dietitian about a nutrition protocol that she obtained at a seminar. She believes it should be implemented for all patients in the facility. It contains a food supplement. There is no research showing that the food supplement is beneficial or harmful. The item is heavily advertised by its manufacturer and is gaining popularity in the marketplace.

Is it ethical for the dietitian to implement the protocol?
**Situation One**

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Situation One

What if the dietitian reviews the protocol and notices that it contains an automatic order for a food supplement that costs $5.00 per day and that cost will be passed on to the patient. There is no research showing that the food supplement is beneficial or harmful.

Is it ethical for the dietitian to implement the protocol?
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Unnecessary Care?

Foods, nutrients or diets for which there are no clear and beneficial indications

Laboratory tests that are not a clear indicator of inadequate or excessive nutrient intake

Writing recommendations for a patient with no nutrition problem
Situation Two

A dietitian avoids meat and poultry in his own diet for personal reasons. He also advocates a low-fat weight diet reduction diet because he has had success with it in his practice. He is asked to see a client who is part owner of a small, local company that sells organic beef. The client eats about 6 ounces of organic red meat per day. He also eats a wide variety of organic produce. His physician has told him that he needs to lose about 20 pounds.

Is it ethical for the dietitian to advocate a meat-free diet for this client?
## Situation Two

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Situation Three

The dietitian is working with a patient who will be discharged with an enteral feeding. The dietitian recommends a canned, commercial product but the family members want to give the patient blenderized foods that she ate prior to the enteral feeding. A pre-illness diet history reveals that the patient was taking an adequate diet. The dietitian is concerned about the safety of a blended formula.

What is the most ethical course for the dietitian to take?
Situation Three

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What to do when you can no longer care for the patient

You must not abandon the patient, denying them of care to which they are entitled. You must refer them to another caregiver who will provide the same level of service.

You must document that you treated this patient fairly, or as you would any other patient.

Document that you tried to educate the patient about the importance of the plan and the consequences of failure to follow it.

Document the patient’s response to the education in their own words.

Document what you told the patient to do if their plan failed.