

Chapter 1

Professionalism

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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What is Professionalism?

The term “professionalism” is frequently referred to among professionals, yet a clear definition of what is meant by the term is difficult to find. In defining “professionalism” it is advantageous to start by considering the root word of the term which is “profession”. The Oxford English dictionary defines “profession” as “the occupation which one professes to be skilled in and to follow; (a) a vocation in which a professed knowledge of some department of learning or science is used in its application to the affairs of others, or in the practice of an art founded upon it; (b) in a wider sense: any calling or occupation by which a person habitually earns his living”¹. The word “professes” is noteworthy in this definition as it implies a dedication and commitment to the provision of something of value for the greater good of others. Two very basic features of a profession are a specialized body of knowledge and a commitment to service. A more expanded list of the characteristics of a profession includes the following (1 – 4):

- Practice includes a defined body of knowledge and skills built upon rational theories and facts.
- Practice includes a formal education process which leads to required qualifications for practice.

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1989.

- Practice is organized and regulated by the profession through recognized regulatory bodies (or colleges); members of a regulatory body (or college) are self-regulated and practice within prescribed regulations.
- The mandate of a profession is formalized in written documents that include legislated governing authority, licensure, continuing competence and conduct.
- Practicing members of a profession are committed to serve in their area of expertise, actively ensuring that they are current in their knowledge and skills, serving as an authority in public affairs related to their domain. They maintain high standards in their performance and value public interest above any other rewards.

Professions have legislated acts and regulations, bylaws, guidelines, standards of practice and codes of ethics, all of which provide the legal framework for practice and for the provision of competent, safe, professional services. More specifically, legislated acts and regulations, bylaws and guidelines outline requirements for governance, registration, performance of restricted activities, continuing competence and discipline while the standards of practice and code of ethics establishes how professionals should conduct themselves in the provision of professional services.

Overall, the term “professional” has a distinct legal meaning with definite criteria that must be met before a person is a professional in the eyes of the law; the law imposes special obligations and duties on persons who have the legal status of a professional (5).

The Dietetic Profession

Health professions governed by legislation are distinct and identifiable by the type of professional services they provide, by how they meet the health care needs of society and by what they do. The key piece of legislation that outlines governance of health professions in Alberta is the *Health Professions Act (HPA)*. The *HPA* outlines consistent rules by which all regulated professions must provide competent, safe professional services to the public. Parts 1 – 9 of the Act are common to all health professions regulated under the *HPA* and address matters such as the following:

KEY PRACTICE POINT

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are professionals who are regulated by the *Health Professions Act*.

- Establishment and governance of professional colleges
- Initial registration and continuing competence of health professionals

- Investigation of complaints
- Discipline
- Protection of professional titles

Part 10 of the Act contains profession specific schedules that address unique aspects of each profession including the profession’s practice statement and protected titles. Information related to the practice statement and protected titles for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists is below.

Practice Statements

The services that health professionals provide are sometimes referred to as the “scope of practice” of the profession; these are defined in legislation. Under the *HPA* in Alberta, descriptions of services provided by each health profession are referred to as “practice statements” rather than “scopes of practice”. To help clients and the public understand the health services a regulated professional is able to perform, the *HPA* provides practice statements for the professions regulated by this legislation. The statements describe in plain language, the day to day practice of members of a profession and inform the public of the type of services that they can expect a profession to provide (6).

Under the *HPA*, practice statements are not exclusive to particular professions and can have areas of overlap. For example, a physical therapist may teach a patient to do range of motion and muscle strengthening exercises to help them regain their ability to bend and straighten their knee post-surgery. An occupational therapist will encourage the same patient to become independent in managing self-care tasks (getting in and out of a bathtub, putting on socks, etc.) which are activities that also strengthen the muscles surrounding the knee joint as well as improve the range of motion of the joint. It is becoming increasingly rare for any one health profession to perform any activity exclusively.

The professional services that are provided by Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists in their practice are reflected in their practice statement. Schedule 23 of the *HPA* pertains to the Profession of Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists and defines the practice of dietetics as follows:

“In their practice, registered dietitians and registered nutritionists do one or more of the following:

- a) assess nutritional status and develop, implement and evaluate food and nutrition strategies and interventions to promote health and treat illness

KEY PRACTICE POINT

In their practice, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists generally perform professional services that fall within their provincially legislated practice statement.

- b) apply food and nutrition principles to the management of food service systems and to the development and analysis of food and food products
- c) promote optimal health, food security and food safety through the development and delivery of food and nutrition education, programs, and policies, and
 - c.1) teach, manage, and conduct research in the science, techniques, and practice of dietetics, and
- d) provide restricted activities authorized by the regulations.”²

Right to Use Protected Titles for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists

The *HPA* lists protected professional titles in profession specific schedules; only practitioners registered with their college can use a protected title in connection with providing a health service in Alberta. Consequently, only practitioners who have the competence to provide professional services and have met the registration requirements reflective of quality practice within the profession’s practice statement can call themselves or be identified as a member of that profession (i.e. nurse, dentist, dietitian, etc.) Protected titles help the public more easily identify qualified health service practitioners (7). For Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists, Schedule 23 Profession of Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists of the *HPA* protects the right to use the following titles (8):

KEY PRACTICE POINT

In Alberta, “Registered Dietitian”, “Dietitian”, “Registered Nutritionist” and “RD” are protected titles that may only be used by those registered with the College of Dietitians of Alberta.

- a) Registered Dietitian
- b) Dietitian
- c) Registered Nutritionist
- d) RD

The *HPA* also protects use of the words: college, registered, regulated and regulated health professional. Only members of colleges regulated by the *HPA* may use these terms.

² Province of Alberta. *Health Professions Amendment Act*, 2008.

Titles are not portable. Health professionals must be registered in the province where they practice in order to have a right to use protected titles and to provide professional dietetic services. Registration in one province does not mean title may be used or that you may work in another province. Membership with the Dietitians of Canada does not confer the right to use professional titles. Only registration with a provincial regulatory body allows professionals to use protected titles and provide professional dietetic services.

KEY PRACTICE POINT

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must be registered prior to providing professional dietetic services.

Regulated members on the General Register are eligible to wear the “RD” pin of the College of Dietitians of Alberta (the College), identifying them as fully qualified members who have the right to use all protected titles of the College. Wearing the RD pin assures the public, colleagues and employers that an individual is a regulated health professional.

It is every member’s responsibility to protect the integrity of the profession by reporting misuse of title to the College. The Registrant Directory is continuously updated, providing a current listing of who is authorized to practice and use the protected professional designations.

Aspects of Professionalism

If the term “profession” describes what an individual does, “professionalism” describes how professionals do it. Specifically, professionalism is the manifestation of optimal attitudes and behaviours in the provision of high quality professional services that place the interest of others above one’s own self interest (9). Aspects of professionalism that will be discussed in relation to the practice of dietetics in Alberta include Professional Competence, Professional Conduct and Professional Image.

Professional Competence

The *Health Professions Act (HPA)* defines competence as “the combined knowledge, skills attitudes and judgment required to provide professional services”³. The major components of competence are described as follows:

Knowledge, Skills and Judgment: The College of Dietitians of Alberta regulates the practice of Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists in Alberta by setting entry requirements and standards of practice for the profession and ensuring that members meet those standards. Prior to gaining admission to the College, applicants must demonstrate the required knowledge, skills and judgment through successful completion of an accredited academic program related to dietetics, an accredited dietetic internship program and by passing the registration examination approved by the College.

³ Province of Alberta. *Health Professions Act*. R.S.A. 2000, c. H-7. s. 1(1)f.

Attitude: Attitude is defined as “a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways”⁴. The attitude of an individual is critical in delivery of competent professional services. Professionals who demonstrate desirable attitudes practice in compliance with professional legislation, regulations, standards, practice guidelines and their Code of Ethics. Specifically, they will demonstrate the following:

- Commitment to provide high standards of practice
- Provide services within the scope of their practice and competence
- Engage in activities to maintain or enhance their competence
- Respect individuals, their rights and their concerns
- Accept responsibility and accountability for their actions and decisions
- Acknowledge their mistakes and correct them

Continuing Competence: Participation in continuing education and professional development activities is essential in maintaining and enhancing the competence of a professional. The *HPA* requires that all colleges have a Continuing Competence Program in place to monitor the ongoing competence of their members and enhance the provision of professional services.

Professional Conduct

All members of a profession are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner. “Conduct” relates to the way an individual behaves towards others and how they act in their work. Blair Maxton, LLB describes societal expectations of behaviour for health care professionals as follows:

“Because professionals possess special skills and knowledge and because members of the public place their trust and confidence in those persons, the law imposes high ethical and moral duties on professionals in terms of how they serve their clients and patients. This is particularly true in the health care field where patients seek professional advice and treatment for the most important commodity of all: personal health and well-being”⁵.

Both professional competence and professional conduct will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

⁴ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/attitude>.

⁵ Maxton, B. *Understanding the Health Professions Act: A Practical Guide for Colleges, Their Members and Healthcare Stakeholder*; 2003, p.3.

Professional Image

“The first thing people usually notice about you and what they examine in the greatest detail is how you look.”⁶ Professionals who pay attention to their appearance are more respected and perceived as more credible than those who do not (10). In order to be perceived and accepted by others as a credible professional, it is important to look like a professional and portray a professional image.

Professional image also relates to online persona. As regulated health professionals, it is important to remember that members are professionals “24/7” and that the professional image portrayed online and elsewhere can have far reaching effects. The professional and ethical obligations laid out in the College of Dietitians of Alberta’s *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice* (see Chapter 4) are relevant to all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists at all times.

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists should carefully consider the professional image that they portray in their personal grooming, dress, demeanor and online presence and interactions.

⁶ Dimitrius, J, Mazarella, M., *Put Your Best Foot Forward*, Simon and Schuster, USA; 2000, p. 146.

Chapter Summary

A “profession” has specific characteristics which include a specialized body of knowledge and a commitment to service. The term “professional” has a distinct legal meaning with definite criteria that must be met before a person is a professional in the eyes of the law; the law imposes special obligations and duties on persons who have the legal status of a “professional” (5). “Professionalism” can be described as the manifestation of optimal attitudes and behaviours in the provision of high quality professional services that place the interest of others above one’s own self interest. “Professionalism” is demonstrated through professional competence, professional conduct and professional image.

In Alberta, descriptions of services provided by health professions regulated under the *Health Professions Act (HPA)* are referred to as “practice statements”. Practice statements describe the practice of members of a profession and inform the public of the type of services that they can expect a profession to provide. The following titles used by dietetic practitioners are protected through legislation: Registered Dietitian, Dietitian, Registered Nutritionist, and RD. In Alberta, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must be registered with the College of Dietitians of Alberta (the College) in order to practice dietetics and use the protected titles of the College.

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are “professionals”. This means the following:

- They practice the “profession” (dietetics)
- Their practice is regulated under the *HPA* by the profession itself (self-regulation)
- Others (employers, colleagues, clients and the public) expect Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to behave and conduct themselves in a “professional” manner and to practice competently in all interactions and activities.

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