

Chapter 5 Continuing Competence

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Professional Competence

Competence is defined by the *Health Professions Act (HPA)* as “the combined knowledge, skills, attitudes and judgment required to provide professional services”¹². In this context, competence is more than the knowledge and skills directly related to dietetics; it is also more than the accomplishment of discrete and isolated tasks. Competence involves the interaction and integration of knowledge, critical thinking, judgment, attitudes, skills, values, and beliefs. It includes the ability to generalize learning and apply knowledge from one situation to another.

As professionals, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists have an obligation to ensure that they are competent in their practice throughout the course of their career. Remaining competent in the ever-changing field of dietetics means that Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must continuously learn and apply the most current evidence-based research and information in their practice. Whether a Registered Dietitian or Registered Nutritionist is entering a new area of practice, returning to the work force, or continuing to practice in their same position, as a professional, they are obligated to ensure

¹² Province of Alberta. *Health Professions Act*; R.S.A. 2000, c. H-7. s. 1(1)f.

that they are competent in their practice. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists who fail to remain competent may place the safety of their clients at risk. They also risk becoming the subject of a complaint or lawsuit and may lose their job.

Professionals who are competent demonstrate the following actions and behaviours in their practice (1):

- They use and apply up to date knowledge and skills
- They make sound decisions based on appropriate data
- They communicate effectively with clients
- They evaluate their own practice
- They improve their performance based on self-reflection, applied practice and feedback from others

KEY PRACTICE POINT

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists have an obligation to ensure that they are competent in their practice throughout the course of their career.

The requirements for competence at entry to practice are stated in the *Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice*; and the requirements for maintaining competence in practice of Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists in Alberta are stated in the *Code of Ethics*, the *Standards of Practice*, and *Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements*.

The *Code of Ethics* is a set of principles of professional conduct which establishes the ethical expectations that Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are required to adhere to in their professional practice. (Please refer to Appendix 2 for the *Code of Ethics*.) In relation to competence, the *Code of Ethics* states the following:

“4.0 Maintains competence in dietetic practice.

4.1 Personal Competence

- (1) The dietitian is knowledgeable of and adheres to all relevant public protection legislation applicable to their dietetic practice including but not limited to: health profession legislation, protection of persons in care legislation, child welfare legislation, protection of information and privacy legislation.
- (2) The dietitian assumes responsibility and accountability for personal competence in practice.
- (3) The dietitian acquires new skills and knowledge on a continuing basis to ensure safe, competent and ethical dietetic practice.
- (4) The dietitian practices dietetics based on scientific principles and current evidence-based practice.
- (5) The dietitian practices within the scope of practice, the limits of their qualifications and their own level of competence.

- (6) The dietitian consults or makes referrals as appropriate when a situation is beyond their level of competence.
- (7) The dietitian accepts only those responsibilities which they are competent to perform. If the dietitian is asked to assume responsibilities beyond their present level of competence, the dietitian acquires additional information, knowledge or skills prior to assuming the responsibilities or declines to accept them.”¹³

The *Standards of Practice, Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements* and the *Standards of Practice: Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct Prevention* describe the standards that must be met by all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists practicing in Alberta. (Please refer to Appendix 3 for the *Standards of Practice and Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements* and Appendix 4 for the *Standards of Practice: Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct Prevention*).

In relation to competence, Standard 6. Competence from the *Standards of Practice* states that in their practice,

“Registered Dietitians are responsible and accountable for their continuing competence in order to provide safe, ethical, professional services.

To demonstrate this standard, Registered Dietitians will:

- a) Provide professional services within the limits of their qualifications and personal level of competence.
- b) Evaluate their own practice and participate in continuing professional development to identify and address learning needs.
- c) Identify practice situations beyond their personal level of competence and consult, refer, and/or obtain further knowledge and skills to provide professional services.
- d) Maintain competence in present area(s) of practice, incorporating evidence into professional services.
- e) Acquire the knowledge and skills to practice competently in emerging practice areas as required.
- f) Comply with the CDA continuing competence program, adhering to all applicable legislative and regulatory requirements.
- g) Voluntarily withdraw from practice if they self-identify that they are no longer able to provide safe, competent, ethical services (e.g., illness, substance abuse).
- h) Comply with practice hour requirements as set out by CDA.
- i) Adhere to CDA requirements for practicing restricted activities.”¹⁴

The *Standards of Practice* are the basis for the Continuing Competence Program’s self-assessment tool, used annually to reflect on and set priorities for learning and development for the upcoming year.

¹³ College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Code of Ethics*; 2007.

¹⁴ College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Standards of Practice*, 2018.

In 2022, Continuing Competence Program rules and requirements were relocated from the *Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists Profession Regulation* to a *Standard of Practice*. The *Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements (2022)* is a separate Standard document that must be met by all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists practicing in Alberta. The Standard states,

“Registered Dietitians maintain competence in practice through self-directed continuing competence planning in order to provide safe, ethical professional services. Registered Dietitians demonstrate compliance with College Continuing Competence Program Requirements, by participating in and complying with the program, review audits, document audits and as requested by the Registrar.”

The full *Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements* is included in Appendix 3.

Continuing Competence Program Requirements

KEY PRACTICE POINT

All Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are required to participate in the Continuing Competence Program of the College each year in order to maintain their registration with the College and obtain their practice permit.

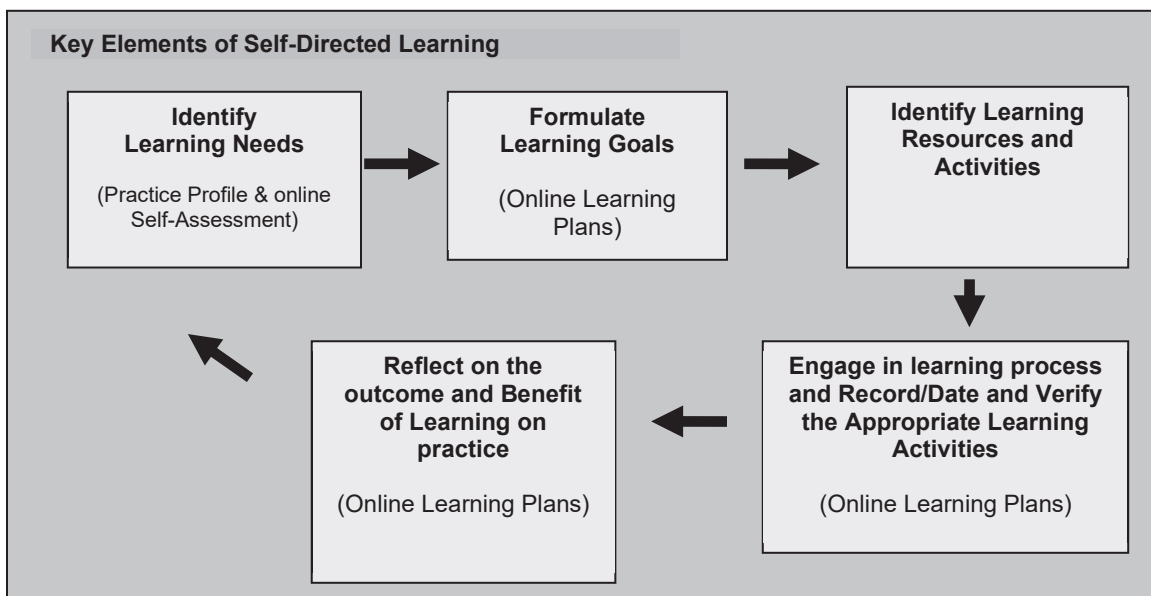
Under the *HPA*, the College of Dietitians of Alberta (the College) has the legislated responsibility to establish, maintain and enforce standards for the continuing competence of its regulated members (2). In meeting this responsibility, the College has a Continuing Competence Program (CCP) in place to monitor the ongoing competence of regulated members and enhance the provision of professional services. The CCP is designed to ensure that regulated members of the profession remain competent and provide safe, ethical services that meet or exceed professional standards, thereby protecting the public.

It is a legislated requirement that all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists participate in the CCP of the College regardless of employment status. The *HPA* requires that regulatory colleges link the renewal of practice permits to meeting the requirements of the CCP. When completing their application for renewal forms each year, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are required to make a declaration that they have participated in the CCP during the previous year.

NOTE: New Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists who are entered on the General Register of the College on or after October 1st of each year are not required to participate in the CCP until the following CCP year.

The College of Dietitians of Alberta’s Continuing Competence Program

The CCP of the College is built on a foundation that is based on an extensive review of competence models used by a variety of professions. It focuses on maintaining professional competence based on the profession’s *Standards of Practice*. The CCP also applies principles of adult learning theory and contains the following key elements of self-directed learning:



The CCP was created to be adaptable, allowing regulated members to reflect on competence as it relates to their unique practice, work environment and learning style. The program was also designed to integrate with employer quality assurance programs and performance management systems. The CCP is flexible, outcome-based and designed to support the professional growth and development of regulated members in a way that enhances their career and personal goals.

The CCP of the College is made up of the following components (3):

Part 1 - Practice Profile (mandatory)

Learning goals and activities are most beneficial when they relate to enhancing the learning, the knowledge, and the skills of each individual regulated member's current practice. As each regulated member defines their professional practice profile, they will find it easier to complete the CCP Self-Assessment and be better able to focus their learning on activities that relate to their practice.

Part 2 - Self-Assessment (mandatory)

The CCP Self-Assessment is based on the *Standards of Practice* and is designed to assist regulated members in identifying their learning needs and documenting opportunities to develop and improve various aspects of their practice.

Each *Standard of Practice* includes indicators which describe the specific activities demonstrated by regulated members complying with the Standard.

Part 3 - Learning Plans (mandatory)

The learning plan captures learning goals and identify activities to achieve them. Specifically, it will ask you to identify: the Standard and Indicator chosen (based on

CCP Self-Assessment); the learning goal; the anticipated benefit to your practice; and an activity record (includes date completed, title of activity, and speaker/host). During renewal, a Reflection on Learning will be required.

Completion of Continuing Competence Program requirements must be entered online during registration renewal prior to March 31. In order to obtain their practice permit, regulated members must meet the following requirements of the CCP:

- Completion of two (2) Continuing Competence Learning Plans online, each including a learning goal, benefit to practice, activity record of competence activities completed and, reflections on learning.
- Completion of a Continuing Competence Plan, as above, for each Restricted Activity (if applicable) online.
- Identification of two (2) learning goals for the upcoming year based on indicators identified during completion of the online CCP Self-Assessment. An additional learning goal for each Restricted Activity (if applicable) is also required.

Please note that all dietitians must choose two priorities for learning (plus restricted activities, as applicable) from the *Standards of Practice*, in a given year. Dietitians choose goals and activities that align with the *Standards of Practice* and that support specific areas of enhancement in their practice. The Practice Profile therefore becomes important in justifying unique practice settings and positions and therefore learning needs.

Detailed instructions for completion of the CCP are available on the Continuing Competence section on the For Dietitians section of the College website at www.collegeofdietitians.ab.ca, as well as within the CCP Manual.

Competence Activities

In their practice, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists typically participate in various activities that facilitate their ongoing professional development. The CCP enables regulated members to formalize, reflect on, and report these activities to the College.

The range of activities that can be undertaken is wide and varied. It is recommended that regulated members choose a variety of competence activities, suited to their learning style and the goals that they have set. Learning activities that are most beneficial to maintaining professional competence are those that focus on enhancing the regulated member's unique practice.

Competence activities may include but are not limited to the following:

- Journal club / study group
- Courses / practical skills updates
- Conferences / workshops / in-services

- Case studies / rounds
- Networking / discussion groups
- Development / delivery of presentations
- Self-directed research / literature reviews
- Job shadowing
- Consultation with other health professionals / peers
- Work with College / professional association

Regulated members of the College may also be required to complete workshops or self-study modules from time to time as set out by the Council.

Documentation and verification of Competence Activities

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must be able to verify their participation in activities related to their competence goals. Proof of attendance at events in the absence of other supporting documentation is not sufficient. Verification of activities (that include the date the activity occurred) might include but is not limited to combinations of the following:

- Course certificate / receipts *and* notes*
- Notes from rounds / education sessions
- Listing of references / resources used *and* summary of findings
- Contact information for colleagues consulted *and* description of case or issue discussed
- Course outline or program *and* notes*
- Copies of materials / presentations developed
- Meeting date(s), participant list *and* topic summary of journal club / study groups
- Summary of ideas generated with colleagues on an identified practice issue or problem
- Written summary of literature review
- Description of a case study, research or other finding that impacted your practice

KEY PRACTICE POINT

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are responsible for retaining records for the purpose of verifying their participation in competence activities. CCP and related documentation must be retained for a minimum of three years.

* Please note that a certificate or course outline on its own is not sufficient to verify activity completion; supplying notes, for example, is an excellent way of demonstrating both attendance and learning from the activity.

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must log their activity records in their Learning Plans online to enable the College to verify their competence activities and outcomes. All documentation must be kept current and available electronically for review by the College. CCP and related documentation are to be retained by regulated members for a minimum of three years.

Monitoring the Program

Maintaining the competence to practice dietetics is the responsibility of each regulated member of the College; the CCP is designed to assist regulated members in maintaining their competence. Under the *HPA*, the College has the legislated responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of the program and each regulated member's participation in the program. *Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements* states the requirements to “periodically select regulated members for a review and evaluation (audit) of all or part of the member’s continuing competence program”.¹⁵

In meeting this responsibility, the College has established a Continuing Competence Committee (CCC). The CCC completes regular audits of regulated member online CCP documentation to ensure compliance with the program.

The College will complete a review audit of each regulated member’s online continuing competence program submission at least once every three years, to ensure compliance with the program. Specifically, the College will assess the appropriateness of each learning goal, benefit to practice, activity record of learning activities, and reflection on learning. The Committee also looks for demonstration of the following in the reflection on learning:

- How achieving the learning goal influenced/benefitted practice **and/or**
- How the regulated member knows they are more competent in their practice as a result of achieving their learning goal **and/or**
- An example of feedback received (and from whom) that confirms the regulated member’s competence **and**
- Is written in the past tense (rather than expected future impact or use; the only exception to this rule is when a member is currently not practicing dietetics, for example, when on maternity leave).

Further, 10% of regulated members selected for review audit will be randomly selected for a document audit each year. A document audit includes a request from the College to submit

¹⁵ College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements*. 2022.

verification of completed CCP activities logged in the submitted learning plans within the Activity Record. Selected regulated members will be required to upload digital copies of the materials to the College for review, which will also include a review of online Continuing Competence Program goals, activities and evaluations / reflections.

Regulated members selected for a document audit will be notified by email and will be required to submit all Continuing Competence Program activity verification online and respond to any questions from the College with respect to their competence program.

The evaluation criteria that will be used in a document audit is outlined below.

- Continuing Competence Program requirements are complete, which includes the following:
 - Online Self-Assessment against the *Standards of Practice*
 - Learning Plans including:
 - Learning Goals
 - Benefit to Practice
 - Learning Activities
 - Reflection on Learning
 - Online CCP Self-Assessment of Restricted Activities, as appropriate
 - Restricted Activity Learning Plans, as appropriate
- Verification of Activities:

The selected regulated member must submit dated evidence of each documented activity within the continuing competence year, demonstrating completion of a learning activity related to the planned learning goal.
- Review of online reflection based on above criteria.

Non-Compliance with the Continuing Competence Program

The College provides direction to regulated members when their CCP does not meet the established evaluation criteria. Regulated members must undertake any additional actions related to their program as directed by the College. Failure to comply with the directions provided by the College may result in conditions on, suspension or cancellation of the practice permit.

Chapter Summary

The *Health Professions Act (HPA)* defines competence as “the combined knowledge, skills, attitudes and judgment required to provide professional services”¹⁶. As professionals, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists have an obligation to ensure that they are competent in their practice throughout the course of their career. The requirements for maintaining competence in the practice of Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists in Alberta are stated in the *Standards of Practice, Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements*, and the *Code of Ethics*. Under the *HPA*, the College of Dietitians of Alberta (the College) has the legislated responsibility to establish, maintain and enforce standards for the continuing competence of its regulated members. In meeting this responsibility, the College has a Continuing Competence Program (CCP) in place which is designed to ensure that regulated members of the profession remain competent and provide safe, ethical services that meet or exceed professional standards, thereby protecting the public. It is a legislated requirement that all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists participate in the mandatory program of the College regardless of employment status. The *HPA* requires that regulatory colleges link the renewal of practice permits to meeting the requirements of the CCP. Under the *HPA*, the College has the legislated responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of the program and each regulated member’s participation in the program. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are responsible for retaining records for the purpose of verifying their participation in competence activities. CCP and related documentation must be retained for a minimum of three years. The College provides direction to regulated members when their CCP does not meet the established evaluation criteria. Failure to comply with the directions provided by the College may result in conditions on, suspension or cancellation of a regulated member’s practice permit.

¹⁶ Province of Alberta. *Health Professions Act*; R.S.A. 2000, c. H-7. s. 1(1)f.

Case Scenario 5.1

GG was so excited. It was the beginning of May, and after 3 years in practice as an RD, she was taking a 10 month leave to travel. She arrived back to Alberta the following March, returning to her previous position. Upon her return, she realized that her registration renewal with the College was due. She completed the necessary Learning Plan submissions within the online registration renewal forms; she was able to submit her renewal prior to the deadline. When GG's CCP was randomly selected for a document audit and her documentation was provided to the College office, it was noticed by the Continuing Competence Committee that GG had simply written "Not Applicable – Not Working" within her online submissions.

Case Scenario 5.1 Questions

1. Has GG met the requirements of the Continuing Competence Program? Explain your answer.
2. Has GG met her obligation to ensure that she remains competent in her practice?
3. What are the risks involved in the way in which GG addressed her continuing competence program during her leave?
4. What would you recommend if you were on the Continuing Competence Committee?

Chapter Quiz

1. All of the following statements are true *except* for the following:
 - a) Competence is defined by the *Health Professions Act* as “the combined knowledge, skills, attitudes and judgment required to provide professional services”.
 - b) Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists who fail to remain competent in their practice risk becoming the subject of a complaint or a lawsuit.
 - c) It is the responsibility of the College of Dietitians of Alberta and employers to ensure that Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are competent in their practice.
 - d) Requirements for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists related to maintaining competence are stated in the *Standards of Practice, Standard. Continuing Competence Program Requirements*, the *Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice* and the *Code of Ethics*.

2. Under the *Health Professions Act*:
 - a) The College of Dietitians of Alberta has the legislated responsibility to establish, maintain and enforce standards for the continuing competence of its regulated members.
 - b) Participation in the Continuing Competence Program of the College of Dietitians of Alberta is mandatory for all Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists.
 - c) The College of Dietitians of Alberta is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the program and each regulated member’s participation in the program.
 - d) All of the above
 - e) Answers a and b only

3. All of the following statements are true *except* for the following:
 - a) The Continuing Competence Program of the College of Dietitians of Alberta includes a Self-Assessment and Learning Plans.
 - b) Under the *Health Professions Act*, meeting the requirements of the Continuing Competence Program is linked to obtaining one’s practice permit.
 - c) Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are responsible for retaining Continuing Competence Program and related documentation for one year.
 - d) All of the above
 - e) Answers a and b only

4. Failure to comply with the requirements of the Continuing Competence Program of the College of Dietitians of Alberta may result in:
 - a) conditions being placed on a practice permit
 - b) suspension of a practice permit
 - c) cancellation of a practice permit
 - d) All of the above
 - e) Answers a and b only

References

1. Epstein, RM, Hundert, EM. Defining and Assessing Professional Competence. *JAMA*. 2002; 287:226-235.
2. Province of Alberta. *Health Professions Act*; R.S.A. 2000, c. H-7.
3. Province of Alberta. *Registered Dietitian and Registered Nutritionists Regulation*; 2002.