

Evaluating the Development and Implementation of the Dietitian Role on Rural Primary Care Memory Clinic Teams

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Background

- Persons living with dementia frequently experience a variety of challenges related to eating, nutrition, and hydration [1,2,3,4].
- Nutrition guidelines emphasize tailored nutrition care for persons living with dementia delivered by a nutrition expert, such as a dietitian [4].
- Dietitians are experts in nutrition and the only regulated health professional trained to provide medical nutrition therapy [5]. They employ many strategies to assist persons living with dementia [1].
- In the community, many persons living with dementia are at risk for or experiencing malnutrition [6]. However, lack of resources may impede connecting dietitians to community-dwelling patients [7, 8, 9, 10].

RaDAR Primary Care Memory Clinics

- RaDAR primary care health memory clinics aim to improve access to local team-based dementia care in southern Saskatchewan communities [11,12].
- Memory clinics are held one day every 1-2 months in each community.
- Team members have access to an electronic medical record template and handbook to guide their assessment [11,13].
- Dietitian role developers from existing memory clinic teams championed the addition of a formal dietitian role
- description to the template and handbook.



Objective

To explore the registered dietitian role in primary care memory clinics serving persons living with dementia in rural Saskatchewan, with a focus on the development and implementation of the role.

Methods

- Utilized a qualitative descriptive design.
- Gained ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BEH 4612) and operational approval from the Saskatchewan Health Authority.
- 23 participants were selected through purposive sampling. All participants consented to participating in this study.
- Seven telephone focus groups were conducted between June 2024 and February 2025:
 - 3 with RaDAR memory clinic teams
 - 1 with primary health care managers/facilitators
 - 2 with registered dietitians
 - 1 with registered dietitian role developers
- Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using the 6 phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke [14].

Results

By dietitians for dietitians

Dietitians in memory clinic communities championed the creation of the role. Their nutrition expertise and experience had a meaningful impact on the final memory clinic role.

By dietitians

“[...] I feel like because I’m creating this role I got to have a lot more, like, say in things that might be beneficial to help me learn as a dietitian, to better support the client [...]”

- Dietitian Role Developer

For dietitians

“I found that by making it a formal role and like having that work standard, it gave clarity to me to okay, these are the really important things that I need to make sure I’m doing.”
- Dietitian Role Developer

Fitting in while standing out

Dietitians complement memory clinic teams by fitting into their structure and aligning with their goals. At the same time, dietitians offer a new care perspective and expertise to patients.

Fitting in

“And, so we wanted the memory clinic role of the Dietitian to align with the other professionals in the clinic that were already defined.”

- Dietitian Role Developer

Standing out

“I find that having the dietitian there kind of helps us look at another aspect that we really didn’t look at beforehand. Just seeing the patient from another lens.”

- Memory Clinic Team 1

Results

The right ingredients for the recipe

Nutrition care delivered in memory clinics is underpinned by a patient-centred approach. Dietitians work to understand each patient's context to inform their nutrition intervention.

The ingredients

“So, it’s kind of that, covering all the bases as a team approach, kind of that client-centered care that’s so important to make it as beneficial to the client as possible.”
-Registered Dietitian

The recipe

[...] chronic conditions don’t go away because you have dementia, so we need to also manage the chronic conditions that they may have before the dementia diagnosis.”
-Dietitian Role Developer

Conclusion

- This study found value in dietitian-led development of the memory clinic role, pointing to potential benefits of using the expertise and experience of role enactors in role creation.
- Dietitians participating in memory clinics used a patient-centred approach to inform their nutrition interventions. They considered factors such as caregiver supports, food safety concerns, chronic diseases, food security, and dementia progression.
- Dietitians were found to contribute specialty knowledge and assessments on memory clinic teams, while fitting into team structures. These findings contribute to the growing research on interprofessional teams in dementia care.

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