

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF REGISTERED DIETITIANS IN NUTRITION CARE FOR PERSONS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA IN THE COMMUNITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

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BACKGROUND

- For people living with dementia, nutritional status is often affected as many of the pathophysiological changes that occur as a result of dementia also impact eating and drinking¹.
- Changes to nutrition status place those living with dementia at a high risk for malnutrition^{1,2}. Despite this risk, malnutrition screening is not always adequately or routinely performed in community and primary care³.
- Dietitians are regulated health professionals and are experts in human nutrition and its interinfluence with health^{4,5,6}. However, dietitians may not receive referrals when warranted^{7,8,9}, or be included in interdisciplinary teams^{7,10}.
- Many caregivers of persons living with dementia indicate they would like support and treatment from a dietitian^{8,9,11}.

RADAR RURAL PRIMARY CARE MEMORY CLINICS

- In southern Saskatchewan, RaDAR primary care memory clinics have been established in rural communities through a collaboration between the University of Saskatchewan's Rural Dementia Action Research (RaDAR) team and Saskatchewan Health Authority primary health care (PHC) teams¹².
- Each memory clinic team consists of a family physician and/or nurse practitioner lead, home care nurses/social workers, occupational therapist, and an Alzheimer Society First Link Coordinator. Some teams also include a dietitian, physical therapist, and/or pharmacist.
- Memory clinics operate one-day every 1-2 months as needed.

OBJECTIVE

To explore and understand the facilitators and barriers to Registered Dietitian involvement in primary care memory clinics and other community settings that provide nutrition care for people living with dementia.

METHODS

- This study used a qualitative descriptive design.
- Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BEH 4612). Operational approval was granted by the Saskatchewan Health Authority.
- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- 6 focus groups took place between June and July 2024: 3 with RaDAR memory clinic teams, 1 with primary health care managers and facilitators, and 2 with Registered Dietitians covering memory clinic communities.
- 23 individuals participated in the focus groups. Of the memory clinic teams that participated, one team included a dietitian and two did not. Three participants took part in more than one focus group.
- Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflexive thematic analysis¹³.

INITIAL FINDINGS

It's a matter of perspective

Nutrition is not always perceived as important or is not well understood, and therefore the potential role of the dietitian in dementia care may not be recognized. However, with increased dietitian involvement, health care professionals realize the extent nutrition is impacted and recognize the substantial influence dietitians can have on the nutrition status of persons living with dementia.

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“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... our dietitian does a good job looking at like are they having trouble eating, is it because of texture, is it because of other reasons that we just don't really think about.” -MC Team 2

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We are on the same team

Memory clinic teams value a team approach to health care. Teams work together, possess an interdisciplinary spirit, and perceive the health of memory clinic patients as the responsibility of each team member. Since dietitian involvement has increased in the clinics, many health care professionals recognize the need for the dietitian to be a member of the memory clinic team. The relationships developed between allied health care professionals have been important in creating trust, and improving the understanding of one another's roles.

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“I appreciate, having the opportunity to be involved in this clinic as a team-based approach. And just like I said just helping to spread awareness of what a dietitian can do and some of the benefits to the client. I think it's expanding that knowledge to other health care professionals just really will help spread awareness of when other clients they can refer or when to refer down the road.” – Registered Dietitian

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INITIAL FINDINGS

What does rural have to do with it?

Health care delivery in rural areas has key differences compared to urban areas. Many of the differences create challenges for effective health care in rural areas. However, some aspects of rural health care create opportunities for rural health care professionals to introduce creative solutions and capitalize on the rural opportunities.

“We look at also having our day programs, having places where's there's access to Meals on Wheels that provides some of that food security. I know that has been a challenge that the home care policy manual says that you have to be able to keep food at this temperature. If you are not able to do that then those locations aren't able to access Meals on Wheels because it's not safe...so that is one of those things especially people in the urban centers they have more access to things like food banks, Meals on Wheels, adult day programs and its going to supply some of those food.” - PHC Managers and Facilitators

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Structure is the key to success

Cohesive well-defined procedures and directives are necessary to guide the memory clinic team on how they should deliver nutrition care and proceed in various nutrition care situations. In the absence of structure, nutrition care is not delivered consistently, and the team is not always aware of proper procedures. In addition, systemic healthcare disparities lead to fewer resources and supports for health care professionals and patients. Lack of resources and supports creates additional pressure on health care professionals.

“Like maybe it's no fault of theirs necessarily. They maybe just didn't know what kind of questions or screening or nutrition concerns or even what the role of the dietitian is specifically or how that nutrition component fits in.” –Registered Dietitian

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CONCLUSION

- This study identified several barriers to the involvement of Registered Dietitians such as health care professionals not recognizing the need for dietitian involvement, lack of a defined dietitian role and limited access to nutritional resources in rural areas.
- Conversely, several facilitators were discovered, including the impact of pre-existing knowledge of the dietitian's role, health care professionals' passion to deliver optimal patient care and the memory clinic's use of a team-based approach.
- Drawing on the varied perspectives of health care professionals in the team-based memory clinics is important to highlight existing enablers and challenges to nutrition care, and will serve to inform recommendations to improve dementia care.

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