Practice Guideline

Guideline on

VIRTUAL DIETETIC PRACTICE

Saskatchewan College of Dietitians

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Virtual dietetic practice is defined as the provision of dietetic services (e.g. counseling, consultation, monitoring, teaching, etc.) which involves any type of intervention with a client who is remotely located from the dietitian providing the service. It can include telephone, videoconferencing, email, apps, web-based communication and wearable technology. Virtual dietetic practice can occur within a jurisdiction and also across borders within Canada.

SCD Registration Policy on Electronic Practice deals with the issue of cross border practice (in person and virtual) and sets out the expectations for SCD registrants providing cross border virtual dietetic practice to residents in other provinces and the requirements for dietitians from other Canadian jurisdictions providing service to clients who reside in Saskatchewan.

Whether dietetic services are delivered virtually or in person, dietitians have the same professional obligations. This guideline is intended to highlight considerations for virtual dietetic practice and to remind dietitians engaged in virtual practice of their professional obligations.

Benefits and Limitations of Virtual Dietetic Practice

Considerations:

- Limited availability of assessment information
- Potential for breach of confidentiality and communication failure
- Potential for unauthorized practice
- Potential for providers to practice outside of their scope of practice
- Potential for virtual practice to be favored for cost savings when direct contact may be more appropriate
- Limited ability of regulators to effectively enforce professional standards and obligations should the regulatory body be required to conduct investigations in other jurisdictions.

Client-Centered Care Virtual Dietetic Practice

Relevance

Dietitians are required to act in the client's best interest at all times. In the context of virtual dietetic practice, dietitians must constantly assess the appropriateness of virtual dietetic services. The following criteria should be considered by the dietitian:

- Services need to be applicable and feasible through virtual means and designed to meet the client's need.
- Services need to add value and be client-centered.
- The risks need to be analyzed and not outweigh the benefits.
- The technology must be easily accessible for both users.
- The technology needs to perform and support all type of services offered.
- Both the dietitian and the client need to have the proper level of knowledge and competency related to the use of technology.
- Data obtained through virtual practice must be reliable and accurate in order for the dietitian to set the appropriate plan and follow-up.
- Clients and families can be actively engaged during the delivery of services.

Accountability

The public benefits from increased access to dietetic expertise through virtual dietetic practice. However, as public safety is the regulatory mandate, the public needs to know that their dietitian is registered and accountable through a provincial dietetic regulatory body. Registration with a regulatory body ensures that dietitians have met specified qualifications to practice dietetics and practice with established professional standards and that clients have a way to raise a concern and lodge a complaint. With few exceptions, current dietetic legislation and policy in Canadian jurisdictions do not address virtual dietetic practice, however it is generally accepted that a regulatory body still has jurisdiction over the conduct of registered dietitians.

Transparency

Dietitians providing services through virtual means across borders should inform clients in the jurisdiction where they are registered of potential limitations of virtual practice. Clients should be provided with the dietitian's contact and registration information so they know how to reach them and the regulatory body with whom they are licensed. As well, clients need to understand that complaints about the dietitian's conduct would have to be made to the regulatory body in the jurisdiction where the dietitian is registered. Dietitians should use the title dietitian to provide clarity to the public, since designations differ from province to province. The title dietitian is consistent in all provinces and the use of other titles (e.g. nutritionist, nutrition consultant) may confuse their professional status.

Insurance providers may have different policies/criteria for reimbursement if the service is provided through virtual practice. Dietitians should encourage clients to confirm their insurance coverage prior to delivering the services.

Duty to Clients

Dietetic intervention with a client through virtual practice constitutes a dietitian-client relationship in the same way that any in-person interaction would constitute a dietitian-client relationship. The dietitian has a duty to provide care to clients in a manner consistent with care provided in person and to adapt the duty to the medium. The same professional obligations that exist in face-to-face dietetic services also exist for virtual dietetic practice.

a) Consent – As part of obtaining informed consent when providing virtual dietetic service, the dietitian should clearly disclose limitations and risks of virtual dietetic practice (including risks associated with confidentiality), their name, registration status, jurisdiction(s) in which registration/license is held and contact information for their registering/licensing jurisdiction.

***b) Competent services* –** Using technologies to support practice is part of the entry-to-practice competencies for dietitians. Current research, evidence-informed guidelines, and best practice in telehealth should be used to improve the quality of services. Dietitians should include telehealth in their continuing education and address any limitations that could affect the quality of care or the compliance with provincial legislation. Education and training should also be available to the clients on the safe use of equipment and devices used in service delivery.

c) Collaboration **–** Dietitians will refer clients to other health care professionals when required. Where appropriate, Dietitians will form and maintain partnerships with other service provider, programs and organizations to meet the client needs. If communication or an exchange of data is required with another health professional, dietitians need to obtain consent from the patient, as required when providing in person services.

d) Professional Practice **–** Dietetic assessment, intervention and recommendations must be evidence-based or in accordance with best practice, and in accordance with the ethical and practice standards of the province where the dietitian is registered. Record keeping is accurate, up-to-date and secure. They also need to be in accordance with the ethical and practice standards of the province where the dietitian is registered. If any standard of practice of the profession cannot be met virtually, the dietitian must refer the client elsewhere. Dietitians must not attempt to exempt the services provided virtually from compliance with standards of practice and ethical behavior by obtaining releases or disclaimers from the client.

e) Confidentiality **–** Dietitians need to ensure confidentiality around data collection, documentation and storage but also around the consultation. For example, the dietitian should identify those who are able to observe the interaction during the services (others in a room during a telephone call or videoconferencing). Any risk of breach with the use of technology should be assessed and managed. Telehealth equipment and devices, access and storage needs to be secured adequately.

f) Safety-

Technology & Security – Appropriate and reliable equipment, device and information systems should be used at all times. Dietitians should ensure a plan is in place to address any technical problems should they arise, for the services they offer. For example, this could include, what to do if there is a power outage during the consultation, or if there is a connectivity or software problems.

Clinical Issue - Dietitians should also keep in mind that clinical problems may occur as a result of their intervention and should plan for alternative health resources to support their client. For example, what to do if a client has a hypoglycemia during the session, or if the person mentions suicidal thoughts

References:

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