Attitudes of Canadian Dietitians about Nutraceuticals and Functional Foods

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Research Questions

- How do Canadian dietitians (RDs) feel about nutraceuticals & functional foods?
  - Should these products carry health claims?
  - What roles do RDs play in recommending these products?
  - Are there concerns about these products?
  - Do RDs recommend them to clients?
Methods

- Questionnaire was pretested & then completely redesigned
  - RDs wanted to explain their answers, concerns

- 32 open-ended questions, 11 with probes
  - “Are RDs the most appropriate professionals to be recommending nutraceuticals? Why?”
“A functional food is similar in appearance to, or may be, a conventional food that is consumed as part of a usual diet, and is demonstrated to have physiological benefits and/or reduce the risk of chronic disease beyond basic nutritional functions, i.e., they contain bioactive compounds.”

(Health Canada, 2007)
Definitions Provided

“**A nutraceutical** is a product isolated or purified from foods that is generally sold in **medicinal forms** not usually associated with foods.

- A nutraceutical is demonstrated to have a physiological **benefit** or **provide protection** against chronic disease.”

  (Health Canada, 2007)
Telephone Survey

- Randomly drew names of 238 RDs across Canada

- Mailed letter re: study, with definitions, & approx. date we’d be calling

- 2 trained research assistants tried each phone number 6+ times

- Answers written verbatim or summarized & verified with participant
Contacted 180 RDs; 151 (84%) completed interviews

60% thought that health claims should be permitted with adequate scientific evidence and govt. regulation

81% said that RDs were most appropriate professionals to recommend functional foods
  ◦ Same as fortified foods
Results, cont’d

- Mixed feelings about RDs recommending nutraceuticals
  - “yes” – same as vit/min supplements
  - “no” – more appropriate for pharmacists, physicians

- 93% said that other professionals have roles re: nutraceuticals
  - Pharmacists (98/151), alternative practitioners (34/151), nurses (20/151)

- >50% said that nutraceuticals conflict with ‘healthy eating’ messages
RDs cautiously optimistic about potential benefits of functional foods and nutraceuticals, both for specific clinical groups and for general public.

Wide diversity of opinions on nutraceuticals, appropriateness of health claims, use of biotechnology.
- Responses varied by area of RD practice and length of time in practice.
RDs want to become more knowledgeable about the research conducted to establish the efficacy of these products

Partnerships with govt, industry, and other health professionals, esp. pharmacists, will help ensure that consumers get consistent messages

Well–designed studies to establish health benefits and safety are needed
Follow-up: Inter-professional Approaches to Practice

  
  - Held April 26 at University of Waterloo
  - Approx. 60 attendees – RDs & pharmacists from industry; practitioners, academics
  - Discussed market trends, regulation, roles in providing advice to consumers/patients

- RD/RPharm teams; mailed primer on FFN
Dietitians strongly believe they are the best-qualified health professionals to talk about food, function, & diet

- They support the promotion of foods for health benefits.
- They want to be better informed about the bioactive ingredients present/added to foods.
- Some worries re: food = nutrients, “medicalization” of food
Take-Away Message #2

RDs less confident in recommending isolated food components as nutraceuticals

- Worry about regulation, potential for consumer confusion or deception
- Feel that pharmacists are important partners, esp. if products are regulated as NHPs
FFN is a new, evolving area and most RDs have had little formal training

- “cautiously optimistic”
- “show me the [unbiased] evidence”

Training with pharmacists, alternative health care providers, nurses, to ensure consistent messages
Thanks!

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