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?”

Definitions Provided

- "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

Results

- 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

Conclusions

- 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

Relevance to 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

- CIHR funding for: **Functional Foods & Nutraceuticals:** A Collaborative Forum Linking Practitioners & Researchers
  - 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

Take-Away Message #1

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

Take-Away Message #3

- 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

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