



Research paper

Exploring the current working profiles of nutritional therapists to inform curriculum and professional development

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Nutritional therapy
Complementary therapy
Functional medicine
Systems biology
Nutrigenomics
Clinical practice

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Nutritional therapy (NT) since the mid-1980s has undergone a process of professional, regulatory and educational development. To inform the continuance of this process the Nutritional Therapy Education Commission (NTEC) initiated an exploration of practitioner profiles.

The aim was to ensure NTEC are meeting these developmental requirements by: informing a revised Core Curriculum; ensuring an evidence-based approach to professional training; establishing appropriateness of 'fit' between qualification and subsequent occupation and clarifying possible barriers to, or reasons for non-continuance of practice.

Methods: An anonymous online survey recruited 408 qualified nutritional therapists in the UK, Numerical data were analysed descriptively and statistically using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science).

Results: The majority of the respondents were female, aged between 31 and 50 years and working part time, in self-employed clinical practice; almost a third of these earning a primary income. The current training provision appears to be adequate, however further training needs were identified. Barriers to practice maybe income driven or personal for a minority, however further research is needed.

The majority were registered with the voluntary regulator and were members of a professional body with a range of continuing professional development strategies. Functional medicine approaches were reported to be widely incorporated into practice and awareness of the role of nutrigenomics was common, but clinical application of nutrigenetic testing was less widespread.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that in the captured population current NT education and professional provision results in clinical practice however there are areas for further development.

1. Introduction

Nutritional Therapy (NT) is a client focused, evidence based bioscience complementary therapy (CAM), which recognises biochemical individuality by applying nutrition science to the promotion of health; resulting in personalised nutritional and lifestyle advice [1]. There is currently no agreed definition of CAM however the US National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health suggests it is when a non-mainstream practice is used together with conventional medicine [2]. The NT approach is in accord with Systems Biology (SB) [3], which aims to address the underlying causes of poor health by recognising the complex interactions underpinning health and disease and is acknowledged by the profession to be the foundation for NT practice and is acknowledged as Functional Medicine (FM) [4].

Since the mid-1980s NT has undergone a process of professional, regulatory and educational development (Fig. 1), resulting in National

Occupational Standards [5–8]; a Core Curriculum [9]; voluntary registration for practitioners through The Complementary and Natural Health Care Council (CNHC) [10]; course accreditation for training providers via the Nutritional Therapy Education Commission (NTEC) [11]; the Training Providers Forum (TPF) for sharing best practice amongst training providers; and support for practitioners by the two principal professional bodies The British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy (BANT) and the Naturopathic Nutrition Association (NNA). In 2015, there were 1113 CNHC registered practitioners (personal communication), 1465 members of BANT [12] and 300 members of the NNA (personal communication). There are no data available on the gender ratio from any of these organisations prior to 2015, however BANT report (personal communication) that in 2016 they had 300 male members out of a total of 1640 [13]. There are currently 7 accredited training providers [14], delivering courses from Diploma (suggested level 5) to Masters (level 7) [15].

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1986	Nutrition Consultant's Association (NCA) forms as a professional body [16]
1997	BANT formed as the British Association of Nutritional Therapists [16]
1999	Formation of the Nutritional Therapy Council (NTC) to set common standards of education and training for nutritional therapy. [16]
2003	National Occupational Standards(NOS) for NT published by Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Scottish Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (SQCA) [16]
2004	Core Curriculum and Learning Outcomes for NT published by NTC [16]
2006	Launch of NTC process of grandparenting, where NT's applied for consideration for voluntary NTC registration by demonstrating how they met the standards of professional practice [16]
2007	NTC Revision of Core Curriculum [9]
2008	Launch of federal regulator for complementary healthcare professions the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) [16]
2008	Introduction of NTC course accreditation process. [11]
2008	BANT changed its name to The British Association of Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy to reflect the scope of its members' work [16]
2010	The NTC voluntary register was transferred to the (CNHC) [17]
2010	Launch of the Naturopathic Nutrition Association [Personal communication]
2010	Skills for Health Update of the NOS [5,6,7,8]
2014	The NTC changed its name to Nutritional Therapy Education Commission (NTEC)
2015	In 2015, the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) Approval of the CNHC register as an accredited register by the Professional Standards authority (PSA) [18]
2015	Review of Core Curriculum and subsequent development of an interim Core curriculum [9]

Fig. 1. Development of the nutritional therapy profession [5–9,11,16–18].



Fig. 2. Project overview.

The standards of professional practice for NT as described by these professional and regulatory bodies [19,20] ensures the successful, safe, effective, and legal practice of NT, which incorporates compliance with professional codes [19,20]; Advertising Standards [21]; EU Register of Health claims [22]; and regulations around the safe use of nutritional supplements [23] and herbs [24]. The maintaining of educational standards by NTEC [25] ensures that standards of training and education are revised to incorporate current and developing trends in personalised nutrition such as Nutrigenomics; an evolving science that explores the effects of food and food constituents on gene expression [26,27].

Although research into the CAM professions continues to emerge, this has tended to focus on professionalisation of the discipline [28] or on practitioner perspectives [29,30] or on specific areas of clinical

practice rather than the broad characteristics of the profession's graduates. As such, little is currently known about the experiences of CAM practitioners including why they choose their careers, their education, and their professional communities [30]. It is known, however, that there is no established career path, that most CAM practitioners including nutritional therapists are self-employed, and that many embark on CAM training as a second career [30].

A challenge encountered in research with voluntary regulated professions, particularly in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), is defining and sampling an appropriate target population [29,30]. There is an unquantified spectrum of nutrition practitioners and a plethora of training courses outside the framework of practitioner registration and training accreditation [NTEC]; this research was targeted specifically at the regulated NT profession, to inform the direction

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