

Dietitian, nutritionist, food advisor – what’s the difference?

The Health Professions Council and the British Dietetic Association have launched a joint campaign to raise awareness of the role of dietitians and warn consumers against seeking advice from unregulated and inappropriately qualified sources.

The public are increasingly being bombarded with advice from various sources offering quick fix cures or the latest fad diets as well as a plethora of websites promoting the use of supplements and vitamins backed by unsubstantiated health claims or spurious scientific evidence.

The HPC and BDA launched a case study appeal to highlight the work of dietitians across the UK and unearthed some alarming and dangerous evidence of patients suffering adverse reactions to treatments recommended to them by non-

dietitians. These included nursery pupils put on an all-vegetarian menu that put them at risk of iron deficiency, a nine year old with Down’s Syndrome who was prescribed thyroid supplements which is only recommended for those over 12 years old and a woman in her 50’s with chronic fatigue syndrome being advised to take £60 a month’s worth of supplements when a healthy balanced diet was all that was required to improve her health

The case study appeal also highlighted many cases of dietitians treating patients who had previously been given bad advice, for example preventing a woman from having gastric banding surgery and a teenager with Aspergers’ Syndrome who was able to calm down his impulsive and aggressive behaviour following a dietitian’s intervention.

As statutorily regulated and

qualified health professionals, dietitians work to strict codes of conduct that prevent them from recommending inappropriate nutritional advice, herbal supplements or diagnostic tests. As independent nutrition experts they can provide advice that is current, unbiased and evidence based.

“The title ‘dietitian’ is legally protected by the HPC,” says chief executive Marc Seale. “HPC registration means that dietitians meet our standards in education and training, adhere to a strict code of ethics, and must maintain their professional status through continued professional development.

“The HPC was set up in order to protect the public and we strongly believe that statutory regulation can more effectively assure that practitioners are meeting standards and are fit to practise.”

“The role of food and diet in maintaining a healthy lifestyle has never been so popular with the public and in the media,” says BDA chairman Pauline Douglas. “We are living in a health conscious society and it’s important that the public are able to make informed decisions about their diet and health and where – and from whom - to seek advice.

”It is important that the public recognise and understand what dietitians do, as there are many sources offering advice about diet and health – some of which are erroneous and potentially harmful, if not devastating. Dietitians use the most up to date public health and scientific research on food, health and disease, which they translate into easy practical guidance to enable people to make appropriate lifestyle and food choices, taking into account an individual’s lifestyle, budget and health.”

Judy More’s casebook

Dietitian Judy More was contacted by a nursery to assess their all-vegetarian menu. The new menu was introduced to solve the problem of meeting the needs of the multicultural mix of the children attending. Judy assessed the menus and found virtually no foods high in iron to replace the usual sources of fish and meat and concluded that the menu was inadequate for the children and could put them at risk of iron deficiency anemia. She suggested ways of changing the menu to include enough sources of iron by adding tree



nuts and pulses to some recipes so that the new menu would meet the high nutrition needs of growing small children. The

nursery was happy to make these amendments and pleased to know they were providing adequate nutrition for the children in their care.

On another occasion, Judy saw a 9 year old girl whose parents were concerned that she was overweight. The parents took their daughter for an allergy test at a nutrition therapist. This involved putting her finger into a machine. The therapist told the parents their child had citrus and wheat allergy and gave lists of foods to avoid. The family found it impossible to comply with the dietary information

they’d received but did think that the girl’s symptoms of bloating had reduced. These restrictions may have meant her food intake would not provide all the nutrients to meet the adolescent growth spurt and the increased nutrition demands at this time putting the child’s growth at risk. Judy discussed a nutrition and lifestyle programme with the family after finding there was no scientific evidence that she needed to avoid wheat or citrus foods. They were happy with the plan and goals that they agreed with the dietitian.