

College of Dietitians of BC

Code of Ethics

Principles and Guidelines

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Code of Ethics – Principles and Guidelines

Performance Expectations

Ethical conduct is an integral part of the legal framework for dietetic practice in BC and the professional commitment Dietitians make to the health and well-being of their clients. All Dietitians registered with the College of Dietitians of British Columbia (CDBC; the College) have a legal requirement to uphold the mandate of the College under the Health Professions Act of British Columbia – to protect the public. They do so by adhering to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics set by the College as they interact with their clients.

The Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics are two parts of a single concept which describe the performance expectations of Dietitians. The *Standards of Practice* define the process and procedures for how Dietitians are expected to perform their job tasks. The *Code of Ethics* define a Dietitian's attitude in terms of behaviour (the so called "soft skills") while performing the *Standards of Practice*.

Principles

The ethical expectations required for minimal level of safe and competent dietetic practice are expressed in five (5) Principles which comprise the College's Code of Ethics.

Principle 1

A Registered Dietitian complies with law and policy at all times by:

- acting in a fair, ethical and legal manner
- acting in full compliance with the letter and spirit of the *Health Professions Act*, Dietitians Regulation and CDBC bylaws, and all appropriate federal and municipal government regulations
- providing professional practice in compliance with professional standards, practice guidelines and codes, including but not limited to the CDBC:
 - Code of Ethics
 - Standards of Practice
 - Practice and Interpretive Guidelines
 - Continuing Competence Program
- adhering to all CDBC policies
- avoiding any situation which could be perceived as improper.

Principle 2

A Registered Dietitian assumes responsibility and holds her/himself personally accountable for all actions taken in the delivery of dietetic services by:

- providing the best service that circumstances, resources, experience and education permit
- acting in a professional manner at all times
- refraining from professional misconduct
- refraining from acts which negatively affect the dignity of the profession
- assuming responsibility for services provided by those under their supervision
- recognizing the expertise of members of the client's inter-professional health care team
- avoiding the placement of blame on an organization or other people when personal activity or behaviour is in question
- avoiding any situation which could be perceived as irresponsible.

Principle 3

A Registered Dietitian demonstrates professional competence by:

- accurately presenting professional qualifications and credentials
- delivering services based on scientific principles and current best-practice information
- acting as a credible and reliable source of current food and nutrition information
- managing change in professional practice in a cooperative manner
- encouraging innovation
- maintaining currency in all areas of practice by acquiring and applying new knowledge, skills and abilities.
- referring clients to another health care professional or service provider when required service is beyond the dietitian's skill or knowledge level.

Principle 4

A Registered Dietitian demonstrates inclusion, honesty and integrity when interacting with clients at all times by:

- exhibiting behaviours, that indicate genuine inclusion, including but not limited to:
 - including the client or substitute decision maker in discussions of service provision
 - providing information in an understandable and sensitive manner
 - bringing forward concerns about unsafe practice or unethical conduct to another health professional, the health professional's supervisor and/or the health professional's regulatory body
- exhibiting behaviours, that indicate integrity, including but not limited to:
 - applying critical thinking skills in problem solving and decision making
 - recognizing and resolving ethical situations
 - inviting the client to make choices
- avoiding any situation which could be perceived as non-inclusive or dishonest.

Principle 5

A Registered Dietitian demonstrates respect, dignity and privacy when interacting with clients at all times by:

- placing the client's best interests as the primary obligation
- exhibiting behaviours that indicate genuine respect, including but not limited to:
 - respecting confidentiality and privacy by:
 - keeping the content of client interactions confidential
 - collecting, releasing, storing and destroying client personal information in accordance with appropriate laws and regulations
 - enabling clients to access their records in accordance with appropriate laws and regulations
 - disclosing confidential client information when referring and consulting only as necessary, with consent or as legally required, or where the failure to disclose would cause significant harm to the client or others
 - treating everyone with respect, including but not limited to:
 - other health care professionals
 - the client's family members/significant others
 - respecting the client's:
 - right to make choices
 - right to a second opinion
 - ancestry/ethnicity/nationality
 - religion
 - age and gender
 - social and marital status
 - sexual orientation
 - political beliefs
 - literacy
 - physical, mental or emotional status
- obtaining verbal or alternative indication of informed consent for planned services, changes in services, refusal and/or withdrawal of services.

Ethical Challenges

Registered Dietitians may, from time to time, encounter ethical problems. These situations tend to fall into three categories:

- **Ethical violations** are neglected ethical principles or standards. *For example, a Registered Dietitian practicing a Restricted Activity without registration is not “complying with law and policy at all times,” Principle 1.*

You can avoid ethical violations by following the Code of Ethics. When a particular course of action is mandated by a principle or standard, ethical conduct is clear.

- **Ethical dilemmas** arise when two different courses of action may be supported by ethical reasons but neither option satisfies both sides of the dilemma. *For example, a Registered Dietitian working in a privately-funded long term care facility provides information to an employer about menu options for the clients. Making an informed choice, the employer chooses the most financially viable option which is more affordable for the clients rather than the option that is nutritionally best for the facility’s clients.*

Ethical dilemmas are usually situation-specific. Resolution may not be clear and may depend on the importance of the opposing principles, and two Registered Dietitians or other health professionals may disagree on the best outcome. The Code of Ethics is able to provide a basis for discussion and decision-making but not a clear guide for action.

Ethical problem-solving is discussed in the next section of this document. One of the critical steps is exploring options. A Registered Dietitian must trust their instincts when working through an ethical dilemma. An ethically correct course of action may result in the intuitive sense of “doing the right thing.”

- **Ethical distress** occurs when there are constraints or limitations on a Registered Dietitian’s practice that cause them to feel powerless and which compromises their ability to practice in compliance with professional regulations. This could occur when a Registered Dietitian is ethically obliged to provide a particular service to a client despite their personal disagreement with the service provision. *For example, a Registered Dietitian working in a hospital in a small community is required to provide dietetic services for more clients than is reasonable. There is insufficient time to perform appropriate assessments and an inadequate level of care is provided.*

The Code of Ethics cannot prevent or resolve ethical distress but it may help Registered Dietitians weigh and consider their responsibilities in the particular situation.

Registered Dietitians are accountable for their professional conduct and may be expected to account for their actions in light of the Code of Ethics principles.

Ethical Problem-Solving

Ethical problems require careful and thorough analysis. The following problem-solving model may help you work through an ethical violation, dilemma or distress. In addition to talking to colleagues, CDBC staff is available to help you determine the ethical course of action.

1. Identify the basic nature of the problem: What is the issue? What kind of problem is this?
2. Gather information about the problem or issue: What are the facts? What is the sequence of events? Are there any applicable laws or policies? Who is involved? What do they say?
3. Identify the specific issue and the ethical principles and/or standards involved: What exactly is the problem or issue? What pieces of information are still missing? How can I locate that information?
4. Identify various options for action: What possible actions would resolve the situation? What, if any, options are not possible?
5. Assess the various options: What are the pros and cons of each? Do all options fall within applicable laws or policies?
6. Determine a course of action: Taking all the gathered information into account, what is the best option – the option best for the client that causes the client the least harm or stress? What would you say if asked to explain why you chose the action you did?
7. Implement your decision: How will you implement this decision thoughtfully and sensitively? How will you indicate a willingness to discuss your reasons for implementing the decision?
8. Assess the consequences of your decision: Did the situation result in the outcome you expected? What went right? What went wrong? How was the process – did you handle it the best way possible? What, if anything, would you do differently next time?

Throughout this problem-solving process, be aware that different people approach ethical problems in different ways, resulting at times in different reasonable outcomes. When assessing your own problem-solving process, you need to be able to defend your decision in light of the Code of Ethics principles and standards and other laws and policies, and the problem-solving process you followed.

The process above is only one of many problem-solving models. Hopefully you will find it helpful when faced with an ethical challenge.

Resources

Alliance of Canadian Dietetic Regulatory Authorities: *Code of Ethics* (draft), 2003.

Canadian Dental Hygienists Association: *Code of Ethics*. Ottawa: March 2002.

Canadian Nurses Association: *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*. Ottawa: August 2002.

College of Dental Hygienists of British Columbia: *Code of Ethics*. Victoria: June 2004.

College of Dietitians of Manitoba: *Code of Ethics for Registered Dietitians*. Winnipeg: January 2005.

College of Dietitians of Ontario: *Code of Ethics Interpretive Guide*. Toronto: September 1999.

College of Pharmacists of British Columbia: *Code of Ethics*. Vancouver: 1997.

Dietitians of Canada: *Code of Ethics*. Toronto: 1996.