

## How well do dietitians market themselves in South Africa?

For many years, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa has used the slogan: "If it's about nutrition, ask your dietitian". However, do the public and our colleagues consider us to be the first point of reference when it comes to nutrition information? Certainly, private practising dietitians form the largest segment of the dietetic profession. In number terms, at least, they should collectively contribute the most to building the image of, and progressing, the dietetics profession.

In this regard, the article by Hanekom et al, published in this edition of the *SAJCN*, is timely and interesting, not only because it addresses a relatively neglected aspect of the profession, but also because it highlights the need for a significantly improved approach to the marketing of the dietetics profession and its practitioners.

Hanekom et al used a descriptive cross-sectional design to document the perceptions of private practising South African dietitians on the relevance of specific healthcare marketing and communication elements. Despite its small convenience sample size ( $n = 79$ ), the study emphasises that private practising dietitians need to promote themselves to the public as a source of reliable, scientific nutrition information. The authors highlight that marketing is essential for the advancement of the dietetics profession, and also to promote private, and one could assume public, practices, since dietitians registered with the Health Professions Council in South Africa (HPCSA) are only one cadre among many non-registered practitioners claiming to offer sound information on nutrition to the public. The authors recommend that it is imperative for private practising dietitians to have a marketing strategy, and to be aware of the relevant marketing principles and communication elements, such as direct marketing, public relations, advertising, and the use of new technology. These aspects may receive insufficient attention during basic training, and this may explain partly why all survey participants were unequally marketing orientated, despite this being considered as relevant and necessary. The principle that "dietetics professionals are the public's leading sources of food and nutrition information and services" should be the premise behind the overall marketing strategy of every South African dietitian.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, dietitians do not appear to have actively set about ensuring that the public is familiar with their professional services. Marketing is a neglected concept, and the responsibility to market themselves and their profession as leaders in evidence-based medical nutrition therapy and practice rests with dietitians, both individually and collectively. There are a number of ways in which dietitians could market themselves effectively. The first, and most

obvious, would be through their patients. In this regard, there is no greater referral than that of word of mouth. This is achieved when it is understood that the marketing goal is client satisfaction, and that successful marketing targets client satisfaction. The goal should also be to continually remind clients of the benefits of a service or product.<sup>2</sup> Credibility and visibility are necessary for successful marketing, but are not sufficient. Dietitians must also know specifically what message they wish to communicate, and the value of their practices or services. Sylvia Escott-Stump, current president of the American Dietetic Association, emphasised that being a professional member of the association, and being perceived as professional, are two different premises.<sup>3</sup> Being professional results from a lifelong commitment to competency and excellence, possessing honourable values, standards and ethics, having an upright character, being determined, and subscribing to a service mentality.<sup>4</sup> She further stated that "professionalism is key to career success", which can only be achieved through effective communication techniques. These should convey a caring message: "You can trust me. Your nutritional well-being is my concern. I care".<sup>3</sup>

Marketing concepts such as "service quality zone of tolerance", "levels of consumer satisfaction", "branding of services", and "patient participation" should become part of basic training and the professional vocabulary.<sup>1,5</sup> When embarking on a marketing campaign, critical components to consider include product excellence, price, venue, promotion and choice of partner. Dietitians and dietetics services should become established as leading scientific, evidence-based best practices and centres of excellence.<sup>6,7</sup>

Available literature on marketing strategies in healthcare management is limited. The literature indicates that branding of services could have a number of benefits for the healthcare industry, including improving technical and service quality. This could be achieved through transparent patient choices, improved communication with healthcare workers, reducing costs and appropriate care, directly resulting in improved patient satisfaction. These would directly result in patient satisfaction due to branding.<sup>8</sup> Lofgren et al focuses attention on the need to find an effective strategy to substantially differentiate a given profession or a private practice in the community, and develop it into a profitable entity.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, initially focusing on improving the healthcare service to the patient, clinicians and other employees could provide the enthusiasm and energy for a marketing strategy that would lead to increased market share and financial and professional profitability.<sup>9</sup>

Proactivity and creativity are essential.

In summary, marketing the dietetics profession and dietetic private practice offers unique challenges. However, doing so should become a habitual occurrence, currently not the case. Additional training on marketing strategies and business management would clearly be helpful. Research on marketing strategies and the effect of ongoing marketing in a healthcare setting are crucial to promote the dietetics profession, and dietitians as experts in the ever-evolving field of scientific nutrition information.

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