

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Three Professions, One Domain: Dietitians, Nutritionists and Dietitian-Nutritionists in the South African Context of Political and Health System Transitions.

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Abstract

Introduction: South Africa's healthcare landscape is characterised by historical inequities and ongoing health system reform. Therefore, it is positioned as a unique case for examining how the professional roles and identities of dietitians, nutritionists and dietitian-nutritionists have emerged in response to systemic change. **Objective:** The objective is to outline how the development of distinct professional identities of dietitians, nutritionists, and dietitian-nutritionists has been shaped by the political history and health system transitions in South Africa (SA). **Results:** The development of the professions of dietetics and nutrition reflects the broader socio-political shifts for which SA is known. The scope of practice for dietitians initially mirrored the curative health system approach by mostly treating individuals suffering from nutrition-related diseases. A global shift from curative to primary healthcare coincided with the country's first democratic election in 1994. In delivering effective and culturally appropriate responses to nutritional challenges, nutrition had to focus on community-level nutrition interventions in supporting broader national development goals. Strategically, the country's nutrition workforce was expanded by formally recognising nutritionists as a profession in 2008. The long-term feasibility of training dietitians and nutritionists as distinct professional categories was, however, not sustainable. Cohesive curriculum reform and integration of training standards, aligned with public health priorities, was recommended. Moving forward, a new professional category of dietitian-nutritionists will be recognised under the recommended curriculum reform. Registered Dietitian-Nutritionists (RDNs) will practise within their own scope as defined under the amended *Health Professions Act (57) of 1974* alongside the two legacy professions, Registered Dietitians (RDs) and Registered Nutritionists (RNs), within their existing scopes of practice. **Conclusion:** Recognition of the RDN professional category in parallel to the continued practice of the two legacy professions, RD and RN, reflects a more sustainable and inclusive approach to nutrition workforce development in SA. However, to further expand the nutrition workforce, the next step should be for legacy practitioners to voluntarily upskill to enable transition to the integrated role. The current lack of opportunities for workforce upskilling in this field calls for action to develop strategies to enable the upskilling of professional practitioners in dietetics and nutrition sciences.

Keywords: Dietetics, Nutrition, Workforce, Upskilling, Health System