NBAD Board comments re: Improving Access and Delivery of Primary Health Care Services in New Brunswick

The New Brunswick Association of Dietitians is pleased to be collaborating with the Primary Health Care Advisory Committee on the discussion paper: Improving Access and Delivery of Primary Health Care Services in New Brunswick.

Registered Dietitians are an integral part of health care for the public. Dietitians provide acute, medical nutrition therapy as well as providing sound, evidence-based nutrition counselling for preventative care. By working with the public at a Primary Health Care level, the nutrition counselling provided by Dietitians can help improve the health and management of the public, thereby reducing the impact of chronic diseases on the medical system.

The Primary Health Care discussion paper correctly identifies a gap in the current system of access to services for New Brunswickers. Registered Dietitians are a valuable asset to improving the access and delivery of primary health care services in New Brunswick.

Pillar 1 – Access

The most common access point for patients to have access to a dietitian are through referral to a specialized clinic such as a Diabetes Education Centre, dialysis units, etc. or through referral to outpatient dietitians located within the hospital system. These centres quite often have long wait lists, combined with high no-show rates and are often located in more urban centres which may be difficult for certain rural patients to access.

Patients may also find it difficult to travel to these centres, often requiring time off of work for multiple appointments. By bringing nutrition services closer to patients and their family physician, patients will be more likely to benefit from nutrition management as well as the collaboration between dietitian and family physician, including any additional health care team members involved in the clients care.
Identifying demand and access to dietitian services by the public is challenging to assess in New Brunswick. The first point of access that a patient has to a dietitian is most often the family physician. As per the research done with the Primary Health Care Advisory Committee and the Canadian Community Health Survey, it is estimated that about 12% of adults in New Brunswick do not have a usual physician or clinic they go to when they require care. This will then likely impact the ability of patients to be aware of their health care options to seek nutritional counselling by a registered dietitian.

The use of dietitians located and employed by the Health Networks would be tracked by statistics collected by each site. These statistics would only track the number of appointments seen, or appointments cancelled. However, these statistics would not necessarily collect information such as the number of referrals made by physicians to dietitians that do not complete a first booking (for numerous reasons, either because the patient does not make initial contact with the dietitian or the patient makes contact but decides not to book an appointment due to wait time or other barrier). This statistic would illustrate the number of referrals, and therefore demand, made to dietitians but show that there is a barrier to clients booking with the dietitian. Identifying this gap would help show that dietitian services are in demand and we need further exploration into how to improve this access for patients.

One other area of access for patients to reach a registered dietitian is of course the private sector. The private sector in New Brunswick is slowly growing but as yet only makes up a very small percentage of practice for members of NBAD. It is difficult for NBAD to determine the demand and use of private practice dietitian services (ie. how many clients seen per day etc). It is not currently tracked by NBAD and we will likely find that private practice (and therefore private pay) services are not accessible to the majority of NB residents. Simply the presence of fee-for-service weight loss centres in New Brunswick (such as Simply for Life, Weight Watchers, etc.) illustrates that the public is keen to improve their knowledge and practice of healthy eating but there are limited funded services and they need to seek out private counselling. The majority of these fee-for-service weight loss centres are not equipped to deal with co-morbid chronic conditions and this is where the services of a credible registered dietitian can be of great assistance to ensure that the client meets their goals in the most healthy and safe way possible. We can promote that with an increased accessibility to reliable nutrition advice, patients will seek out and use these resources thereby linking in with overall goal for improving the health care of the residents of New Brunswick.

NBAD recommendations/suggestions:

- Include access to dietitians as a component of improving access and delivery of primary health care in New Brunswick
• NBAD would like to see the access of dietitians available to residents in more rural areas of New Brunswick while maintaining current dietitian services already present in the health networks

Pillar 2 – Teams

Registered Dietitians are trained to work along side and in collaboration with all health care members. NBAD’s Code of Ethics supports the integration and collaboration of dietitians when working with all health professionals. Dietitian’s practical training also requires competence in facilitating team work.

New Brunswick Association of Dietitians supports the principle of Teams in Primary Health Care and the concept of medical homes for patients, providing patients with access to a collaborative group of health professionals working together with the patient and physician.

“With allied team members onsite, the patient is able to access timely support and the team members can collaborate to provide a systematic and consistent care plan”. Especially with systems in place such as electronic medical records (EMR), the collaboration between health professionals as well as consistent information (medical history, medications) will be more streamlined providing safer care for the patient.

NBAD agrees with the “desired attributes of primary healthy care teams” (p. 45):

- “there is clarity between providers of the roles, based on competencies, and a high level of trust and respect among team members”

- “clear lines of responsibility are understood and incorporated into the working of the team”

NBAD recommendations/suggestions:

• Addition of dietitian services in the medical home while maintaining present government funded dietitian services (Extramural, Public Health, CHCs)

• if team does not have funding for a permanent placement of an RD, suggest having RD consult in to the team for programs or patient education – reduces risk of nutrition advice being provided by health professionals not qualified to provide nutrition advice
Pillar 3 – Timely Information

NBAD supports the use of “One Patient-One Record” EMR\EHR that communicates not just within the medical home, but links to hospital, CHC etc. This would assist dietitians in their practice and be able to provide appropriate client care if they have an up-to-date medical record that is consistent with correct medical history and medication lists.

NBAD recommendations/suggestions:

- continue to advance the implementation of OPOR within the health care system and provide appropriate training to health care professionals, including dietitians, to help carry this goal forward

Pillar 4 – Healthy Living

NBAD supports the vision of Healthy Living in New Brunswick and supports the continued involvement of dietitians in these community and provincial programs in addition to dietitians working as part of the new family practice teams. Dietitians practice with the most recent tools, including the development of patient-centred goal-setting. Dietitians are becoming more qualified with and are practicing motivational interviewing techniques, patient goal setting, and are encouraging patients to be more active in their own health care.

Avoiding duplication of services is important for effectiveness and efficiency. Dietitians working both in the family practice team and the community Healthy Living programs can work collaboratively without duplicating their services.

NBAD recommendations/suggestions:

- continue to involve dietitians in the promotion of health for the public in New Brunswick.
- Use dietitians in the support of healthy communities and the promotion of healthy living.
- Help showcase and promote dietitians as the trusted resource for nutrition information to the public of New Brunswick.