

Cultural Sensitivity in Dietetic Practice



Elizabeth Wilfert,
President

Cultural competence involves refocusing one's behaviour, attitude, awareness, knowledge, skills and even policies to better serve the interest of the public.

In Ontario, you don't have to look very far to see the impact of cultural diversity. Canadians are proud of their 'cultural mosaic'. One simply has to 'Google' Ontario or Canada and Cultural Mosaic and pages and pages come up with not only information and statistics, but cities and towns who celebrate the diversity by way of festivals throughout the year.

According to the latest Canadian census in 2011, Canada has the highest foreign-born population, at 20.6%, among the G8 countries. While the majority of the foreign-born population was able to converse in English or French, 6.5% reported that they did not know either official language. Ethnic origin is another facet of our diversity, referring to the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of our ancestors. The census found more than 200 ethnic origins reported and, of these, there are thirteen different ethnic origins that have surpassed the one-million mark. Another factor the census looked at was religious affiliations. The census states that there has been an increase of 4.9% in the population of the Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist faiths since the 2001, which represents 7.2% of the Canadian population.¹

Given this diversity, it is becoming ever more important to understand how cultural competence affects the delivery of safe dietetic service. Cultural sensitivity doesn't just impact languages but also all the nuances that come with one's beliefs and values. Often, these subtle differences impede the client or patient's understanding or ability to carry out the directives of a health care provider best needed to see the patient to restored health. Health care providers in Ontario are challenged to not only provide the best possible care but also be cognizant of these cultural differences. As RDs, you are encouraged to be mindful of our cultural diversity and how it adds another dimension to the well-being of clients and patients. There are no 'cookie-cutter' approaches as the combinations of factors are too numerous. Cultural competence involves refocusing one's behaviour, attitude, awareness, knowledge, skills and even policies to better serve the interest of the public.

By the time this article is published many of you will likely have participated in the workshop "Enhancing the Cultural Competence of Registered Dietitians in Ontario" presented by the College's Practice Advisors and Policy Analysts, Carole Chatalalsingh, PhD, RD and Deborah Cohen, MHSc, RD. You have taken that step to understanding the relationship between cultural competence and safe dietetic practice. Our primary goal is public protection, and as you continue to ensure safe, ethical and competent nutrition services in your ever changing practice environment, it is important to include cultural sensitivity.

1. Statistics Canada, *Daily Report*, May 8, 2013