



What is Professional Judgment?

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The phrases, “Use your professional judgment”, “She exercised professional judgment” or “In my professional judgment...” come up frequently in dietetic practice. The concept of professional judgment is used in College standards of professional practice, guidelines and other resources. Professional judgment is central to providing safe, effective and competent dietetic services, but what does professional judgment actually mean?

This article presents the College’s working definition of “professional judgment” and how it is applied to dietetic practice. As a starting point, let’s examine the definitions of “professional” and “judgment” separately.

DEFINITIONS OF “PROFESSIONAL” AND “JUDGMENT”

Professional

Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines professional (adj.) as, “relating to a job that requires special education, training, or skill; done or given by a person who works in a particular profession; characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession; exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace.”¹

Registered Dietitians (RDs) are recognized professionals due to their special education, knowledge and skills in the area of nutrition. They are also members of a recognized regulated health profession in Ontario, accountable to the College for compliance with the standards, laws and ethics that govern dietetics. And, they must also comply with the mandatory requirements of our Quality Assurance Program for continued competence.

Judgment

Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines judgment as, “an opinion or decision that is based on careful thought; the act or process of forming an opinion or making a decision after careful thought; the act of judging something or someone; the ability to make good decisions about what should be done.”²

In all areas of dietetic practice, RDs are repeatedly using their judgment — careful thought based on evidence, experience, knowledge and skills — to form opinions and make good decisions about what should be done to provide safe, competent and ethical dietetic services.

Professional Judgment — a working definition

The College’s working definition of professional judgment is:

“Applying knowledge, skills and experience, in a way that is informed by professional standards, laws and ethical principles, to develop an opinion or decision about what should be done to best serve clients.”

THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS OF PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

1. Knowledge

Through academic and practical training, RDs acquire a unique body of knowledge that lays the foundation for professional judgment. To fully learn a profession, students must acquire academic knowledge and practice the discipline under the supervision of seasoned RDs.³ One of the reasons why students complete a program of practical dietetic education is that this practical



experience further builds knowledge, including exposure to formulating and applying professional judgment to dietetic practice.

Dietetic practice changes over time with advances in nutrition research. While part of being professional is doing what you were trained to do, evidence-based practice contributes to the body of knowledge that RDs use when contemplating the best course of action to exercise their professional judgment. If RDs are not keeping up with current evidence and research, they may be missing critical information for effective decision-making for safe client-centred nutrition services.

For more information on evidence-based practice, see

- Evidence-Based Practice Framework at [http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Client-Centred-Services/Evidence-Based-Practice/Evidenced-Based-Practice-Framework-\(2013\).aspx](http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Client-Centred-Services/Evidence-Based-Practice/Evidenced-Based-Practice-Framework-(2013).aspx)
- Evidence-Based Practice Learning Module at <http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Document-Type/E-Learning-Modules/Evidence-Based-Practice-%E2%80%94-Professional-and-Regulat.aspx>

2. Professional Obligations

RDs have a professional obligation to practice safely, competently and ethically. This duty includes using their professional judgment to effectively apply the professional standards, laws and ethics that govern dietetic practice, for example, the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*, the *Health Care Consent Act*, the *Professional*

Misconduct Regulation, the *Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice*, and the *Code of Ethics For the Dietetic Profession in Canada*.

Assessing Risk

Professional judgment is essential for assessing risk in dietetic practice. The College has developed a *Framework for Managing Risks in Dietetics* to help RDs recognize a source of risk, identify the corresponding protective factors, and then implement the best course of action for safe, client-centred services.

Using professional judgment to assess their competence and to practice within their limits helps RDs mitigate risks to clients. It also helps them take action to upgrade their knowledge and skills to continuously provide safe dietetic services. Competence has three components: i) appropriate knowledge, skills and judgment; ii) a professional attitude focused on client welfare; and iii) continuously upgrading knowledge, skills and judgment.⁴ The College's Quality Assurance Program supports RDs to maintain competence in their practice.

Ethics

As professional judgment involves making decisions about what should be done to best serve clients, we cannot ignore the role of professional ethics in professional judgment. Professional ethics is concerned with determining which behaviour(s) reflect professional values, such as integrity, honesty and client-centred decisions. Professional values are ideals that RDs believe in and which inform their professional behaviour(s) and judgments.^{5,6}

Ethical situations can be complex and difficult to sort out. There can also be competing ethics at stake. If you encounter a challenging ethical issue, consider reaching out to your colleagues or the College's Practice Advisory Service to help determine the best course of action. For information, also refer to:

- *Code of Ethics for the Dietetic Profession in Canada*
- *Code of Ethics Interpretive Guide*
- *The Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario*

3. Client Input

Dietetic practice rests on the principle of providing client-centred services in all areas of practice. When exercising professional judgement, an RD must not only consider dietetic knowledge, professional obligations and experience, but also the specific needs, wants and goals of clients for client-centered services. Clients are becoming armed with more information. While there are certainly challenges with addressing the credibility of some information, RDs should be open to client input. In cases where your professional judgment and decisions do not align with your client's, respect their preferences (provided they are informed), include the preferences into the services they provide and document the treatment accordingly.

- *résumé*, Spring 2013, *From the Client's Perspective*.
<http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Client-Centred-Services/Client-Centred/From-the-Client-s-Perspective-2013.aspx>

4. Experience

Practical Wisdom

Ongoing experience in dietetic practice has a significant influence on professional judgment. Some seasoned RDs apply a large body of knowledge, skills, values and experiences; practical wisdom is acquired through many years of practice. Not formally taught and learned, practical wisdom is acquired largely through work (paid or unpaid) experience, ongoing learning and informal conversations with respected peers. Practical wisdom and experience help develop and refine professional judgment.³

Reflective Practice

By critically considering practice, RDs can reflect and evaluate their decisions, weigh alternatives and examine outcomes. Ongoing reflective practice can have a significant impact on the development of professional judgment when RDs assess their actions to determine whether their treatment decisions were appropriate, to make adjustments if necessary or to improve outcomes in the future.

While we all try to avoid mistakes in our dietetic practice, inevitably, mistakes do happen. Mistakes can provide great learning opportunities by admitting mistakes were made, understanding what happened and examining how to avoid similar mistakes in the future. Examining mistakes can be part of reflective practice to build on existing knowledge which contributes to improving professional judgment.

OUTCOMES & ACCOUNTABILITY

Exercising professional judgement means taking responsibility and being able to account for your actions in all circumstances. There may be times when an RD has exercised excellent professional judgement and through no fault of her own, there are adverse client outcomes. RDs are held accountable no matter the outcome, good or bad. If ever questioned in such circumstances, an RD must be prepared to provide sound, evidence-based rationale to support their decisions.

RD accountability is also important for College proceedings where the context and circumstances regarding a complaint or a mandatory report will be considered. An RD's actions (including the actions they chose not to take) and their professional judgement will also be examined during the proceedings.

HOW PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT MAY GET CLOUDED

Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest occurs when, in the mind of a reasonable person, a dietitian has a personal interest that could improperly influence their professional judgment.⁴ RDs must always consider whether their personal interests (e.g., financial or other benefit) can potentially cloud their professional judgment. This may be in relation to their objectivity for or against an action, or a decision about a program, product or treatment recommendation.

Clients need to maintain confidence and trust in the information and services they receive from RDs. Conflicts of interest can undermine the fundamental principles of client-centred care and erode client trust. For more

information, see:

- *Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario*, Chapter 9: Conflict of Interest.
- *résumé*, Winter 2015, Conflict of Interest in Dietetic Practice - How to Handle Competing Interests.
- *résumé*, Winter 2009, Conflict of Interest and RD Practice.

Boundary Issues

A boundary issue is similar to a conflict of interest except that the competing interest is personal feelings rather than financial gain or personal gifts. Boundary crossings have the potential to interfere with an RD's professional judgment because of an emotional or other benefit gained, or because of fears that inappropriate conduct will be exposed. Boundary crossings can also compromise a client's ability to accept or question an RD's treatment suggestions, or provide informed and voluntary consent.⁴

The key to managing boundary crossings is to remain open and objective with clients. As an RD, you have the responsibility to recognize when you or your clients are crossing boundaries. Always take the necessary corrective actions to ensure that your professional judgment is not compromised or clouded when dealing with clients. Make sure the client's interest always comes first.

For more information on boundary issues, refer to:

- Richard Steinecke, *résumé*, Fall 2013, Boundary Crossings: Ten Cases and Ten Misconceptions.
- *Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario*, Chapter 10: Boundary Issues.

Need to know

There are several factors that frame and inform professional judgment for client-centred dietetic practice:

- Four Professional Judgment Building Blocks
 1. Knowledge
 2. Professional Obligations
 3. Client Input
 4. Experience including practical wisdom and reflective practice
- Exercising professional judgment means being accountable for good or adverse client outcomes. Be prepared to provide evidence-based rationale to support professional decision-making in your work place or when required for College proceedings.
- Professional judgment means being diligent in maintaining appropriate professional boundaries: be adept at avoiding conflicts of interest and boundary crossings. Always make decisions that put the client first.

1. Merriam Webster Dictionary, Definition of Professional, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/professional>
2. Merriam Webster Dictionary, Definition of Judgment, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/judgment>
3. Coles, C. (2002). Developing Professional Judgment. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, (22), p. 3-10.
4. Steinecke, R., & the College of Dietitians of Ontario (2014), *Jurisprudence Handbook for Dietitians in Ontario*. [http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Publications-CDO/Jurisprudence-Handbook-for-Dietitians-in-Ontario\(.aspx](http://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Publications-CDO/Jurisprudence-Handbook-for-Dietitians-in-Ontario(.aspx)
5. Code of Ethics Interpretive Guide, 1999.
6. Davis, M. (2012). A Plea for Judgment. *Sci Eng Ethics*.

ATTENTION GENERAL MEMBERS

The portal for the 2015 Annual Registration Renewal will be open for 60 days
from September 1 to October 31

The deadline for annual renewal for General and Provisional Members is 11:59 pm on October 31, 2015.

Temporary Members are not required to complete the Annual Renewal or the SDL Tool.