

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISING DIETETIC LEARNERS

Introduction

Education for dietitians includes both academic and practical education. This guide outlines the College's expectations for dietitians who supervise learners in practical training experiences to ensure that both the supervising dietitians and learners practice safely, competently, and ethically through the practical training process. The information in this guide applies to all dietitians who are involved in the teaching, observation and assessment of dietetics learners completing practical training in both in-person and virtual formats. With the exception of the supervision of students within accredited dietetic practical training programs (which may have their own eligibility criteria), supervisors must comply with [Policy 2-11: Approving Supervisory Dietitians](#) when completing practical training for registration with the College.

This guide is not a comprehensive manual for being a supervisor or preceptor. Additional program requirements and best practices for supervising, precepting, and mentoring may be provided by education programs or individual Supervisors through other credible resources.

The College of Dietitians of Ontario has the duty to protect the public by regulating the profession of dietetics in Ontario. The College considers the practical education requirement essential for public safety because under the structured supervision of one or more Registered Dietitians:

- The learner demonstrates that they have acquired the knowledge and skills in keeping with the Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice (national competencies), and that they can apply them competently and safely to dietetic practice.
- The learner is introduced (or re-introduced) to the [College's Jurisprudence and Professional Practice Standards and Guidelines](#), the culture of the dietetic profession, Canadian culture, the culture of health systems and healthcare delivery in Ontario/Canada.

Learners may be:

- Students/interns from accredited internship/practicum programs (formal internship or practicum programs accredited by the national accrediting body).
- Students pursuing non-accredited practical education (through either a formal program that is not accredited, or informal education that is not associated with any formal program).
- Internationally-educated professionals who require practical education to enable the bridging of their professional knowledge skills and judgement to the context of the Canadian healthcare system and culture.
- Existing members who wish to change their area of practice.
- Former dietitians who are required to demonstrate their currency to return to practice after a lengthy absence from the profession.

Definitions

Practical Education - means experiential learning designed to enable a learner to address specific learning goals and demonstrate competencies in a dietetic setting by completing structured activities under the observation and guidance of a supervisor. Practical education differs from dietetic work, study or volunteer experiences because of the structure and evaluation components with respect to achieving and demonstrating pre-determined learning goals and dietetic competencies. Experiential learning may be gained within an actual workplace or in some instances through simulated activities.

Learners - refers to any person completing experiential learning in a practical setting for the purposes of becoming registered with the College.

Supervisors - are dietitians who have taken on the responsibility to guide, teach, observe, and assess the educational activities of a learner, for the ultimate purpose of evaluating the learner's competence against entry to practice standards. In many education programs, they are also referred to as preceptors, however, these guidelines will use the term supervisor.

Client - any person or organization that is the recipient of dietetic services. For the purposes of this document, learners should be considered as both providers of dietetic services and clients.

Dietetic Practice – is broadly defined by the College as “paid or unpaid activities for which members use food & nutrition-specific knowledge, skills and judgement while engaging in:

- the assessment of nutrition related to health status and conditions for individuals and populations;
- the management and delivery of nutrition therapy to treat disease;
- the management of food services systems;
- building the capacity of individuals and populations to promote, maintain or restore health and prevent disease through nutrition and related means; and
- the management, education or leadership that contributes to the enhancement and quality of dietetic and health services.”

Four Principles for Supervising Dietetic Learners

The four principles for supervising dietetic learners are based on the following professional ideals:

1. The College recognizes the essential role of dietitians in the education, evaluation and mentorship of students, interns, and colleagues.
2. Safe and effective client service takes priority over the goals for education.
3. Best practices in education optimize client care as well as the educational experience.
4. The autonomy and personal dignity of both clients and learners must be respected.
5. The supervisor has a dual relationship with the learner. This means that the learner is to be considered both a subordinate and a client of the supervisor.

6. Joint decision-making and exchange of information between supervisor and learner provides an optimal educational experience.
7. Professionalism, which means being competent, honest, and fair, is expected from both the supervisor and learner. Being professional means putting ethical and high-quality services before the self-interest of the practitioner. Professional Practice is further articulated in the national competency standards (the *Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice*, or ICDEP).

Principle 1: Supervision of the Learner while Maintaining Client-Centred Services (Learner as Subordinate)

When supervising the learner, the supervisor must ensure the safety and appropriateness of the dietetic services received by the client. It is considered professional misconduct to “[Assign] members, dietetic interns, food service supervisors, dietetic technicians or other health care providers to perform dietetic functions for which they are not adequately trained or that they are not competent to perform” (see Section 17 of the College’s [Professional Misconduct Regulation](#)). If a member assigns dietetic functions to a learner who has not demonstrated competence, the member must ensure that they provide appropriate supervision and guidance to the learner and that appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure the safety and well-being of clients.

- a) The supervisor is responsible to provide appropriate supervision to the learner, including:
 - i. working within their own organization to ensure that the learner is in compliance with all organization policies (e.g. immunizations; insurance requirements; workplace legislation; other orientation requirements like occupational health and safety training fire training, introduction to the documentation system, wearing identification as required by the organization). These functions can be carried out by an internship coordinator on the supervisor’s behalf. However, where there is no such education program support, the supervisor may need to consult with other departments such as human resources, occupational health, legal services, or education coordinators;
 - ii. always considering client safety, autonomy, privacy and well-being in planning or suggesting learning experiences for the learner;
 - iii. making all reasonable efforts to ensure that clients or substitute decision-makers are aware of the identity of learner(s) and their degree of involvement in dietetic service (ensuring informed consent of the client);
 - iv. making all reasonable efforts to ensure a clear understanding (on the part of the learner, client, and/or substitute decision-maker) that the supervisor is ultimately responsible for the client’s dietetic services;
 - v. being willing and available to consult with the learner, within a reasonable timeframe, when required or requested;
 - vi. regularly evaluating a learner’s competence and learning needs to ensure that appropriate activities are assigned and that appropriate supervision and safeguards are in place;

- vii. gradually increasing the complexity and responsibility of the activities assigned to the learner, according to their experience and competence, ensuring that all relevant information is made available to the learner, and directly assessing the learner's work as appropriate to ensure the adequacy of the service;
- viii. ensuring that the learner has documented client service appropriately, according to the standards of the organization and the College. The supervisor will need to consult the organization's policies regarding signing and co-signing records; and
- ix. intervening in situations where the safety or well-being of the client is at risk.

b) The Supervisor clearly articulates directions/expectations for the learner to:

- i. participate in client services as appropriate to his or her competencies, and specific circumstances, as well as to meet identified educational needs;
- ii. make the client (or substitute decision-maker) aware of their name, degree of involvement in dietetic service;
- iii. make the client (or substitute decision-maker) aware of the name of the supervising dietitian and the fact that the supervising dietitian is ultimately accountable for the client's service;
- iv. communicate with the supervisor:
 - 1) in accordance with guidelines, policies and procedures of the sponsoring organization;
 - 2) about assessments performed by the learner;
 - 3) in a clinical setting, when there is a significant change in a client's condition;
 - 4) in a clinical setting, when the learner is considering a significant change in a client's treatment plan or has a question about the proper treatment plan;
 - 5) about a client discharge;
 - 6) when a client (or substitute decision-maker) expresses significant concerns; and
 - 7) in any emergency situation or when there is significant risk to the client's well-being.
- v. document his or her findings and treatment plans according to the standards of the organization and the College, and discuss these with the supervisor.

Principle 2: Supervisor is Responsible for Having the Skills and Knowledge Necessary for Teaching and Evaluating Learners (Learner as a Client)

RDs have several responsibilities with respect to the learner, in terms of educating, evaluating, and mentoring the learner and objectively assessing the learner against the entry-level standards/requirements.

- a) As an educator, the supervisor ensures familiarity with the appropriate dietetic standards and policies governing the educational experience. This means:
 - i. understanding the learning objectives, evaluation criteria, and required documentation for the placement and the overall program;

- ii. understanding the criteria for assessing “entry-level” dietetic practice;
 - iii. ensuring that evaluation of the learner’s readiness for progression is based on program expectations and assessment against entry-level dietetic practice; and
 - iv. respecting policies and standards regarding the privacy of information about the learner.
- b) The Supervisor provides objective assessment of the learner’s performance against the standards and communicate this assessment to both the learner and the program. This means:
- i. providing honest, objective feedback to the learner, with clear explanation of how performance can be improved, especially for learners who are struggling to meet expectations;
 - ii. communicating regularly with the learner to discuss and review the learner’s dietetic services, their progress towards learning goals and entry-level competence;
 - iii. helping the learner access additional opportunities for learning and development;
 - iv. communicating and/or consulting with the sponsoring organization about the learner’s progress towards learning goals and/or progress toward entry-level competence, especially if there are concerns; and
 - v. documenting feedback about the learner’s performance, strengths and limitations, using the required documentation.
- c) The Supervisor engages in reflective practice with regard to their competence as a preceptor. This means:
- i. reflecting on their own performance as a supervisor, considering the desired behaviours and attributes of an effective supervisor or preceptor;
 - ii. seeking feedback about their own performance as a supervisor; and
 - iii. developing a plan to address areas identified for improvement.

Principle 3: Supervisor Demonstrates Professional Behaviour and Relationships.

Displaying appropriate behaviour and providing an ethical and compassionate model of client care is particularly important for the supervisor, as learners often gain knowledge and develop attitudes about professionalism through role modeling.

a) Professional Behaviour

The supervisor demonstrates professional behaviour in their interactions with the learner, clients, colleagues and support staff. This means:

- Dietitians in any setting are expected to display professional behaviour at all times.
- The supervisor should avoid any behaviour that interferes with, or is likely to interfere with, quality dietetic services or quality dietetic education (e.g. yelling, providing critical feedback in an open forum, etc.).

- The supervisor should avoid using inappropriate words, actions or inactions that interfere with the ability to function well with others.

b) Professional Relationships

It is important for the supervisor to be mindful of the power differential in their relationship with the learner. Also, they must ensure that the supervisory relationship is free from conflict of interest or bias that could influence, *or appear to influence*, the supervisor's ability to provide an objective and impartial evaluation of the learner's competence:

- The supervisor must not accept payment directly from the learner, where the supervision involves providing an assessment or evaluation of the learner's competence;
- Any personal relationship, which pre-dates or develops during the education phase, between the supervisor and the learner, e.g. family, dating, business, friendship, etc., must be disclosed with the sponsoring organization (education institution, internship program coordinator). The sponsoring organization (e.g. university or internship program) must decide whether the relationship between the learner and the supervisor is free from any conflict of interest; and
- If it is not clear whether the relationship between the learner and the supervisor is free from conflict of interest or bias, the sponsoring organization should arrange for another supervisor. Where learners are working independently (i.e. outside of a formal program or sponsoring organization), the supervising dietitian is advised to consult with the College about whether alternate arrangements for supervision should be made.

For more information about avoiding inappropriate relationships, refer to the Boundary Issues and Conflict of Interest sections of the [College's Jurisprudence & Professional Practice Resources](#).

Principle 4: The Learner is a Member of an Interprofessional Team Within the Practical Education Environment.

The supervisor ensures that:

- a) clients understand that dietetic services involve collaboration from several interprofessional health team members and that learners are integral members of the team; and
- b) under appropriate supervision, learners are expected to take on a growing level of responsibility. The supervisor increases the level of responsibility according to the learner's stage in their program and in line with their growing level of demonstrated competency.

Acknowledgement

This document was adapted from "Professional Responsibilities in Undergraduate Medical Education". The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, September 2003. Available from: <https://www.cpso.on.ca/Physicians/Policies-Guidance/Policies/Professional-Responsibilities-in-Undergraduate-Med>.