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Ethical dilemma in Dietetics: Should dieticians engage in paid partnerships?

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Introduction

With global shifts towards social media as a new way of communicating and receiving information, medical fields must adapt to trends, to maximise reach for providing accurate, evidence-based advice to the general public and call out or clarify mis-information that can be potentially harmful. We have seen instances of mis-information causing harm in the past. Wellness influencers like Belle Gibson promote dangerous pseudoscience as a cure for disease, where an Australian cookbook author faked having cancer to convince her followers that she cured it through healthy eating habits and exercise. Similarly, in Ireland we have seen The Happy Pear influencers making factually incorrect claims on reducing breast cancer risk. Scandals like these confirm the need for healthcare services and professionals to have a strong social media presence, to monitor and counter unqualified, inaccurate health advice that is rampant throughout the internet. It is critical that social media is used ethically and professionally, to represent dietetics as a profession and field of scientific study.

Paid partnerships are a growing phenomenon, with many looking to pay more for products that are supported by claims or endorsed by credible science, celebrities, or professionals. The classic example is Oral B adverts, claiming to be recommended by dentists. This leads to questions around the acceptability and ethics of health professional paid partnerships with private companies.

If a dietician starts working with one company and really believes in their initial products/ethos, they may be delighted to promote the product and company. However, if the company then launches subsequent products that are less health promoting, the dietician may feel pressured or obliged to maintain their commitment to the company for financial gain and promote a product that they don't really believe in or that lacks clinical and scientific studies to support its clinical efficacy. A dietician's financial relationship with a company may lead to falsehood and bias in dietetic advice. The advice given during dietetic sessions may be influenced by the financial gain of the recommendation, not just the strong scientific evidence supporting the product or supporting the dietary advice given. Naturally, if you know a lot about a particular product, you are likely to recommend it, but this may prevent dieticians from seeking out other products that may be nutritionally equal or even better.

Through endorsements, larger brands can become market leaders, charging premium prices as a result of dietetic endorsement, while other smaller companies and start up's may not have the finances to support financial endorsement from dieticians, though their product(s) may be equally beneficial. This could ultimately undermine future food and supplement innovation and limit market choice for consumers. Dietetics as a profession would quickly become less professional and lose public trust. Companies and private practice dieticians would use each other in a symbiotic relationship to gain followers, customers and new clients respectively, and the honesty and accuracy of the dietetic advice may become diluted. Certain wholefood products not owned by one particular brand such as apples, lentils, carrots, water etc may not be promoted due to lack of potential financial benefit from their promotion. As a result, dietetic advice would be weakened through financial interest, bias and less evidence based. Paid adverts on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are often perceived by the public as tacky and unprofessional and could influence and undermine the public perception and respect for dieticians as a medical profession.

National healthy eating guidelines, such as the food pyramid focus on wholefoods and do not advocate branded products. Dietitians endorsing products may mis-lead consumers into thinking they need to buy this protein bar or protein powder to meet protein requirements and evidence based, national healthy

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eating advice would be further undermined. Moreover, marketing may create a sense of guilt amongst parents in particular, who can't afford branded, endorsed products, but want the best for their child. The credibility of dietetics as a profession would be undermined, resulting in even more confusion amongst the public and those with limited nutrition literacy, who may believe this product is essential to keep them healthy, when a key role of a dietician is to educate and empower people to choose wholefood, diverse diets, and adopt a food first approach where possible.

Advertising and social media have huge scope and potential to quickly reach large numbers of people, with varied knowledge and health literacy. It is important that advice shared on these platforms is accurate, unambiguous and not be harmful. Dieticians often work with vulnerable population groups. If a dietician was sponsored by a particular plant-based milk company for example, they could promote it with the intention of only reaching adults, yet social media viewers may mis-understand and give it to their young child, with adverse health consequences. Much of the information and advice dieticians give in clinic is population sensitive and very individualised to socioeconomic and personal context. The primary role of a dietician is to use scientific evidence to give tailored advice to individual patients. If a dietician consciously promotes a particular product for personal gain, taking precedence over the appropriate dietetic advice, then the code of ethical and professional practice for dieticians comes into play. The dietician must enter a client session based on ethical practice and focused on the medical analysis of the patient.

CORU codes of professional conduct and ethics for dieticians set clear rules and standards that must be adhered to in dietetic practice. The guidance states that Dieticians must act in the best interests of service users (1), use social media responsibly (4) , keep professional knowledge and skills up to date (10), act in accordance with the principles of open disclosure (14), demonstrate ethical awareness (22), avoid conflicts of interest (24), and make sure that any advertising is truthful, accurate, lawful and not misleading (26). In following the CORU codes of professional practice, a Dietitian should not engage in paid adverts for personal financial gain where there is a lack of evidence supporting the product or any ethical issues surrounding the promotion of the product. For example, it would be hugely unethical (and unscientific) for a dietician to promote a particular brand of infant formula over breast-feeding, in exchange for financial gain. Similarly, it would be unethical for a dietician to say "do you want your child to be healthy? Then you need x multivitamin." However, the line becomes less clear if the product has a feature that is evidentially superior to competition and the dietician can scientifically justify this recommendation. For example, dieticians may recommend Ready Brek as a suitable breakfast over regular unbranded oats, due to the fact that it is fortified with key nutrients such as iron, an important nutrient in this cohort with common iron deficiency. Drawing the line can be difficult for the individual, so professional practice guidelines are needed and professional enforcement is also required, particularly where personal gain is linked to product promotion.

The scientific approach has informed dietetic research, education and practice and has provided solid and rigorous foundations for the profession to prosper and expand. Science has 'legitimised' the Dietitian profession within modern healthcare[4]. Professional practice cannot be neatly or succinctly defined, if it is to have resonance and meaning across the diversity of dietetics practice. Professionalism is a socially constructed concept, it is multi-dimensional, and it changes across time and place, being influenced by culture and context[3]. Dietetics is a relatively new medical field and our broader social environment is continually changing, posing numerous ethical and practical challenges that need to be considered through a critical, innovative lens. This necessitates expanding paradigms and ways of thinking, educating and being[1]. Dietetics is shifting focus more to the art of practice, and paying more attention to the sociocultural factors within our profession and our education systems, including how we support transitions and socialisation into the profession[2].

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