

## Swallowing Assessments & Dysphagia Understanding Scope of Practice

*Registered Dietitians have asked the College of Dietitians of Ontario, "Are swallowing assessments within the scope of practice of Dietitians?" The answer is yes. In the context described below and according to the definition given in Section 3 of the Dietetics Act (1991), performing swallowing assessments is within the scope of practice of Registered Dietitians in Ontario.*

### The Swallowing Assessment

Normally, a swallowing assessment is performed when a person has difficulty swallowing food and liquids (choking during or after meals and problems initiating or completing swallowing)<sup>1</sup> or exhibits certain related behaviours (prolonged eating time and pocketing food or medications)<sup>2</sup>. The primary purpose of the assessment performed by an RD would be to determine the most appropriate food textures and means of hydration and in some instances, whether a non-oral route for nutrition and hydration is clinically indicated. The RD may also be trained to screen for dysphagia, identify risk and refer the client to a speech-language pathologist. Reassessment of the client by the RD would be performed to detect changes in their condition either by monitoring treatment and management strategies or by monitoring the deterioration of the swallowing functions.

### The Scope of Practice

The dietetic scope of practice statement in Section 3 of the *Dietetics Act (1991)* is very general in nature:

"The practice of dietetics is the assessment of nutrition and nutritional conditions and the treatment and prevention of nutrition related disorders by nutritional means."

#### COLLEGE OF DIETITIANS OF ONTARIO - RÉSUMÉ - SUMMER 2005

### HIGHLIGHTS

3. ONTARIO DISABILITIES INCOME SUPPORT — POLICY FOR SPECIAL DIET ALLOWANCE
5. MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL — NEW ONLINE SERVICE

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CDO WORKSHOP SERIES FALL 2005.

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Scope of practice questions hinge on the meaning of these terms as understood in the English language and within the profession. The terms *assessment*, *treatment*, *prevention* and *nutritional means* are well understood by RDs and are clearly within their scope of practice as they relate to nutritional conditions. The answer to the question “Are swallowing assessments within the scope of practice of RDs” depends on whether “nutritional conditions” or “nutrition related disorders” can be defined to include dysphagia.

Dysphagia can be defined as a nutritional condition because difficulty in swallowing results in threats to health due to nutrition and hydration issues. A “nutrition related disorder” does not exclusively mean that a nutrition deficit is the cause of the disorder. The key is that the term “nutrition related disorder” refers to the relationship between a disorder (a swallowing abnormality) and its treatment (management of foods and liquids to maintain health, need for texture modification or non-oral route of nutrition). Swallowing assessments performed by an RD are directly related to the nutritional means of treatment.

Dysphagia, therefore, is a nutrition related disorder; its treatment includes the management of foods and liquids to ensure adequate nutrition. The following table shows how swallowing assessments and Dysphagia lie within the RD scope of practice as defined in the *Dietetics Act*.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Is a swallowing assessment an assessment?                                  | YES, by definition.   |
| Is Dysphagia a nutrition condition?  | YES, by its very nature it affects how a person is nourished.   |
| Are treatment and prevention by nutritional means involved?                | YES, diet is an approach used to treat or manage dysphagia and prevent aspiration.  |
| Is Dysphagia a nutrition related disorder?                                 | YES, it is an abnormality that most often requires consideration of a diet intervention.  |
| Is performing swallowing assessments a controlled act?                     | NO, unless it involves putting an instrument, hand or finger beyond the larynx or administering a substance by injection or inhalation. |
| Are swallowing assessments within the scope of practice of RDs in Ontario? | YES   |

## Personal Expertise and Competence

In keeping with the College’s *Professional Misconduct Regulation*, it is a profession misconduct to be “treating or attempting to treat a condition that the member knew or ought to have known was beyond his or her expertise or competence.” While specific to “treatment”, the statement must be read to include doing anything related to the assessment and care of a client/patient. Registered Dietitians wishing to perform swallowing assessment should review their continuing competence beyond entry level. The general areas of competence for swallowing assessments include:

- knowledge of normal and dysfunctional swallowing;
- limitations and interpretation of testing and implications of the findings;
- skills in critical assessment and understanding of risks and treatment options;
- competence in communicating results and any recommendation to the family and team;
- knowledge of food alterations and products;
- participating in and managing interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary teams.

## College Work on Dysphagia

The CDO *Dysphagia Working Group* has successfully completed a series of focus groups with members from many work settings to validate knowledge statements and skills required for various aspects of dysphagia screening, assessment, treatment and management. This work builds on the recently published *The Role of the Registered Dietitian (DC) in Dysphagia Assessment and Treatment – A Discussion Paper* (Dietitians of Canada, 2005). The *Dietitians of Canada Dysphagia Assessment and Treatment Network (DAT-N)* identified and validated the specialized skills and knowledge required by RDs as key members of the multi-disciplinary dysphagia management team. In the focus groups, CDO found that RDs support the assessment and treatment skills identified by DC. Recommendations were made to break down some knowledge and skill statements further for clarification. The full report of the CDO dysphagia focus groups and ongoing work of the Dysphagia Working Group will be published in upcoming issues of *résumé*.

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Brody et al. Role of Registered Dietitians in Dysphagia Screening. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (2000) 100:1029-1037.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Cockeram. Canadian Association of Gastroenterology Practice Guidelines: Evaluation of Dysphagia. *Can J Gastroenterol* (1998) 12: 409-413.