

# The Roles of the Department of Dietetics in a University Medical Center

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THE roles of the Department of Dietetics in the University Medical Center can well be illustrated by the following description of the Department of Dietetics of Vanderbilt University Hospital.

A considerable development of dietary services at Vanderbilt University Hospital has occurred during the past decade. This department has long had the support and understanding of the hospital administration, the interest and assistance of the faculty of the School of Medicine, of the visiting staff, house staff and other departments of the hospital. We, in turn, have endeavored as members of the medical team to contribute to good patient care. The patient is the primary reason for existence of a Department of Dietetics; his care in regard to diet is our challenge. In order to fulfill this primary responsibility to patients, we must engage in numerous activities, many of which are not widely recognized. I shall briefly discuss these broad areas: food service to patients and personnel, teaching and research.

## FOOD SERVICE

One usually thinks "dietitian—food"; hence, let us examine the food service in our hospital, first for patients, then for personnel. Provision of meals for in-patients is by a decentralized service; that is, all food is prepared in a main kitchen and transferred by trucks (heated for hot food) to fourteen serving kitchens. There the food is chosen and served by selective menu for regular and many modified diets and the dietitian and her co-workers,

dietetic intern, food service supervisor and dietary aide, are in close contact with the patient and with other members of the patient-care team. It is the dietitian's responsibility to adapt the diet for the individual patient from the prescription of the physician. In order to do so she must know and understand the patient, his food preferences, food patterns, eating habits and, when there is need for change in food patterns, be available to teach the patient and to help him accept the necessary diet regimen. The decentralized type of facility is well adapted for providing such contact with the patient. The proximity of personnel engaged in the care of the patient creates a situation which encourages the exchange of information about him. A member of the nursing service carries the prepared tray to the patient's bed. In so doing, she may relay valuable comments in regard to the reaction of the patient to his tray. The head nurse is easily available for the dietitian to contact; the dietitian is available for discussions with physician, medical students or nurse. The student nurse receives her experience in applied nutrition in this same atmosphere.

The hospitalized patient has many people concerned with his care, as well as visitors, all of whom look to the Department of Dietetics for some kind of food service. Their requirements may be a cup of coffee or a salad to supplement a lunch brought from home; it may be three meals a day, or one meal a day or an occasional meal. To meet these needs this medical center has had an open pay cafeteria for over ten years, a departure from the days when meals were included as part of the staff compensation. This development illustrates a new responsi-

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bility of hospital dietitians. Ten years ago the majority of dietitians were not oriented to the operation of a commercial establishment. Such a responsibility remains a "side line" of the dietitian whose primary concern is for the patient. Nevertheless, this side line is of some considerable importance. For example, our cafeteria serves breakfast to over 400 persons, lunch to 1,000 and dinner to 300 to 400. Another 700 to 800 customers are catered to at the soda fountain on a busy day.

It is of interest to identify the cafeteria clientele. They consist of persons from all walks of life: the staff of the medical school and hospital—medical, nursing, housekeeping, laboratory, secretarial, dietetic—students, professional visitors from all over the United States and many foreign countries, visitors to patients of all categories (staff patients, private patients, semiprivate), and ambulatory and outpatients. The dietitian must apply knowledge of group feeding to provide sufficiently varied menus to appeal to this diverse clientele. A discussion of food service for personnel would be incomplete without recognizing the special meals and parties served from time to time for special visitors or conferees at our medical center, the coffee and cookies for conferences and symposia, served luncheon for postgraduate study groups, or other meetings where food adds to the occasion.

#### TEACHING

In recognition of these activities the Department of Dietetics has added to its program for the training of personnel through introducing control methods for food and labor costs and other management skills.

The whole teaching program in the department is coordinated by an educational director. The dietetic internship at Vanderbilt University Hospital is now in its thirtieth year. Dietetic interns with a B.S. degree from an accredited university or college with certain specified academic requirements are admitted. The current class numbers twelve from eleven states. The dietetic internship is a general one and provides rotation through all areas

of the hospital where a staff dietitian serves. The intern is given an opportunity to apply to a practical situation the theoretic knowledge which she has obtained in college. In addition, she receives 125 class hours of instruction, seminars, field trips, conferences and learning experiences. The dietetic intern at Vanderbilt is taught in part by physicians from the staff of the medical school who discuss disease conditions and the background of dietary treatment; the dietitians follow with the interpretation of the diet.

Student nurses in the Vanderbilt School of Nursing are taught by our dietitians. Nutrition teaching is on an integrated basis, i.e., the student nurse has class work in nutrition, food preparation and then her experience in the patient-care area. The dietetic intern assists in this program. Included in the teaching program are occasional classes for nursing service technicians and licensed practical nurse students. In addition, we are responsible for the teaching of employees and for a constant on-the-job training program.

#### RESEARCH

Within the past two and a half years a metabolic research unit has been initiated. Two dietitians devote full time to this area and, of course the dietetic intern works in this area. Constant diets are calculated, prepared and served to assist the physicians in their research. At present this area is being expanded due to the occupancy of a new metabolic ward, and, hence, the department's responsibilities for such work will be enhanced.

Other activities of this University Medical Dietetics Department include the servicing of an Out-Patient Department with a full-time dietitian for the instruction of patients who are referred by the physicians for dietary guidance. Outpatients are encouraged to make return visits to the dietitian in order to guide the progress of the patient. The dietitian works with physicians in many of the special clinics. No formal plan for instruction of private patients exists here at present, but the dietitians do interview private patients upon the request of the attending physician.



In a medical center such as Vanderbilt physicians may request a quantitative evaluation of a dietary intake through a detailed nutritional history. The dietitian contributes such technical skills relative to diet as needed by the physicians engaged in treatment of patients or in various fields of research.

Since Vanderbilt has long been a center of nutrition interest, we frequently have visitors from other countries for varying periods of time, and the Department of Dietetics affords informal training for these. The training course of the Department has attracted students from abroad; one each from Cuba and the Philippines are currently on the staff.

The staff of the dietary department compiles a diet manual which is available at each patient-care division of the hospital for the use of house staff physicians, medical students and others concerned with care of the patient. The manual is almost constantly under revision in order to keep it abreast of the newer developments.

It is the dietitian's responsibility to provide an adequate diet for patients and personnel, to maintain expenditures within a reasonable range and to supply appropriate records as a basis for bettering service to the medical center.

More dietitians must be trained in management to meet the ever increasing demands on the profession. The managerial responsibilities include the control of expenditures of the dietary department, writing of specifications for food, equipment, proper control of receiving, storing, preparation and distribution of food. Important are skills of personnel management, knowledge of labor costs and control, record keeping and interpretation of costs for administrative purposes.

How does one coordinate these various activities? The diversity of the dietitian's responsibilities in a modern medical center makes organization essential. Allocation of responsibility to each staff dietitian, and the development of personnel to accept these specialized duties is an ever-challenging goal.

