



IJPPR

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHARMACY & PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH
An official Publication of Human Journals

ISSN 2349-7203




Human Journals

Short Communication


August 2019 Vol.:16, Issue:1

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Specificity of the Registered Dietitian Profession in Japan



IJPPR
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHARMACY & PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH
An official Publication of Human Journals



ISSN 2349-7203

Jun Kobayashi*¹, Keiichi Ikeda²

¹Faculty of Nutrition, University of Kochi, 2751-1 Ike, Kochi, Kochi 781-8515, Japan; ²Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hokuriku University, 3 Ho, Kanagawa-machi, Kanazawa, Ishikawa 920-1181, Japan

Submission: 23 July 2019
Accepted: 28 July 2019
Published: 30 August 2019

Keywords: Registered dietitian, Dietitian, Name monopoly, Business monopoly

ABSTRACT

In Japan, there are separate qualifications for dietitians and registered dietitians to secure the credentials of nutrition professionals. However, the scope of work for these qualifications is ambiguous. In addition, the differences between a dietitian and a registered dietitian are not clearly defined. In particular, the professional responsibilities of a registered dietitian are special; few people with this role are employed in one workplace. This study focused on the registered dietitian and introduced the types of work and features of this profession.



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INTRODUCTION

In Japan, fields related to food have undergone major reforms in recent years. The primary reason is the increase in new development and distribution of healthy foods¹⁾. In particular, foods for specified health use, the effects of which have been recognized across the country, have greatly expanded in terms of market size. As with foods for specific health uses, foods with nutrient function claims and functional foods included in health-promoting foods have also been recommended widely. Meanwhile, the food self-sufficiency rate in Japan continues to decline²⁾, and some improvement measures are considered necessary (Fig. 1).

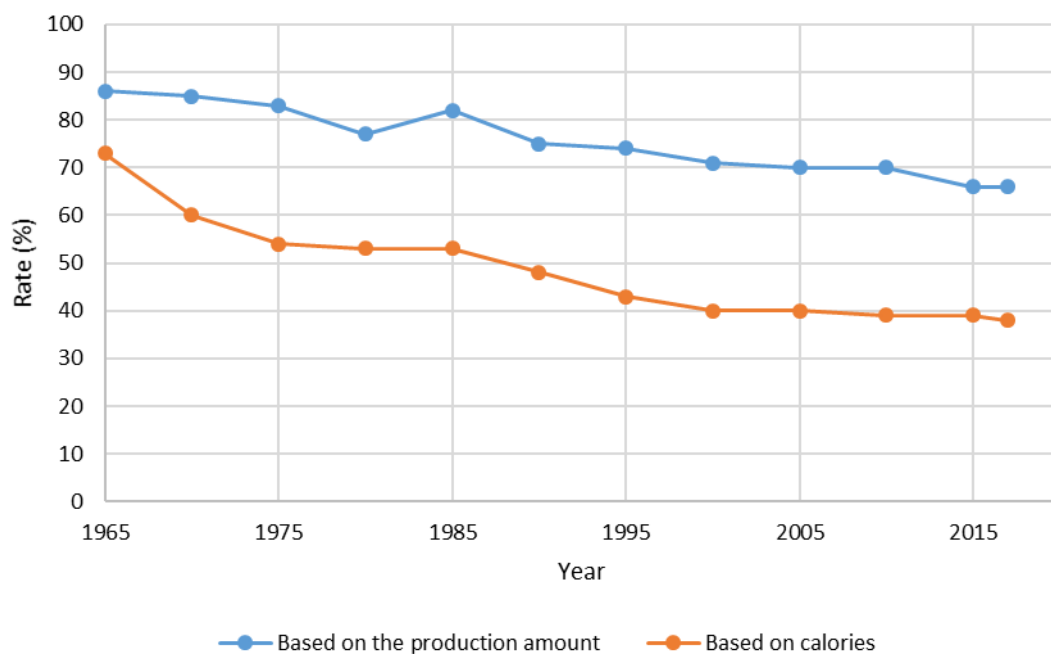


Fig. 1 Japan's food self-sufficiency rate

Based on data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Ref 2))

Many people in Japan perceive dietitians and registered dietitians as food experts. The specialties of these professions are not known well. Indeed, the differences between the work of the dietitian and that of the registered dietitian are not clear to the public. The transformation of the food sector is likely to include the expansion of the significance of the registered dietitian in the hospital setting. In this work, we aimed to describe the kinds of jobs held by certified dietitians and registered dietitians in Japan. In addition, we explained in particular the peculiarities of the registered dietitian profession.

How to be a dietitian or a registered dietitian

There are differences in the way to obtain the qualifications between the dietitian and the registered dietitian. In the case of the dietitian, qualifications can be obtained by graduating from a designated training facility. Japan is a pioneer in the establishment of dietitian and dietitian training facilities in the world. A designated training facility refers to a school designated by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare as a dietitian training facility. Aspiring dietitians need to enter such a school, complete the necessary courses, and graduate. There are various types of schools, including four-year universities, two- and three-year junior colleges, and two- and three-year technical schools. The prefectural governor directly issues the license. Meanwhile, to become a registered dietitian, it is necessary to clear one of two methods: either graduate from a designated registered dietitian training facility or follow a designated practice for a certain period of time after obtaining a dietitian license. Those who fulfill either are qualified to take the national examination for registered dietitians, which is conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Table 1).



Table 1 Requirements for the national examination of registered dietitians

First condition	Second condition
A) Graduated from a dietitian training facility with a two-year training period and received a dietitian license	a) Worked continuously for two or more years in facilities that offer meals to a large number of people, such as dormitories, schools, and hospitals
	b) Worked for more than two years at a sales facility that manufactures, processes, prepares, or sells food
	c) Worked for more than two years in various schools stipulated by the School Education Law
	d) Worked for more than two years at research institutes and health centers on nutrition, or other administrative agencies responsible for administrative tasks on nutrition
	e) Worked for more than two years in facilities aiming at the spread of knowledge about nutrition and other nutritional guidance work
B) Graduated from a dietitian training facility with a three-year training period and obtained a dietitian license	Engaged in nutritional guidance for more than one year at the facilities listed in the above five (a–e)
C) Graduated from a dietitian training facility with a working term of four years and received a dietitian license	
D) Graduated from a registered dietitian training facility with a working term of four years and received a dietitian license	No requirement of previous work experience*

Type of training facility: Junior high school, technical school (two-, three-year system), university (four-year system)

*Usually take the national exam at the 4th year of school

The qualification is obtained only by passing the examination and being registered on the list

in Table 1. The license is issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and the examination is conducted only once a year. Table 1 outlines the requirements for the qualification exam for registered dietitians. In Japan, the dietitian profession began to be recognized in 1924, whereas the registered dietitian profession was created in 1962. The recognition of the relation between food and health has spread rapidly worldwide, and the expectation and importance of registered dietitians who not only manage nutrition but also improve health and prevent/treat lifestyle-related diseases have increased.

Career of the dietitian (job type)

The following is a summary of the kinds of jobs one can take after becoming a dietitian or a registered dietitian: 1) The dietitian responsible for planning schools' lunches is called a school nutritionist; the main responsibility is to prepare a nutrition and meal plan in accordance with the established nutrition standards and create the school menu. 2) Hospital dietitians are mainly responsible for the diet management and nutrition guidance of hospitalized patients and outpatients. 3) There are also dietitians who work in public institutions, such as public health centers. They provide nutrition consultation and nutrition instruction to local residents, especially to patients who need the special expertise of a nutrition instructor. 4) Some dietitians work at welfare facilities, such as nursery schools and nursing homes. The main job is cooking, but there are other tasks, such as ordering food and preparing menus, nutritional calculations, journals, and feeding news. 5) There is also the dietitian who works in the industrial field (e.g., in the employee cafeteria) and health insurance associations. In these occupations, the main task is to provide nutritional guidance for the health management of workers. 6) Dietitians may also work in the manufacturing, distribution, and restaurant industry. The contents of the work are various, including public relations for expanding consumption, sales promotion, research and development of new products and new menus, nutrition consultation, and guidance for customers. 7) Sports clubs and fitness facilities also employ dietitians. The main job is health and nutrition management for ensuring optimal results at major athletic events, such as the Olympics. 8) Dietitians may also pursue media and PR work. In media, such as TV and radio, the dietitian works on disseminating information and coordination related to food. 9) Dietitians may use their license to become volunteers, freelancers, and individual entrepreneurs. For volunteers, a career path is in international cooperation in nutrition activities, such as by working for the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Freelancers can practice their profession by

teaching about diet at various facilities. The dietitian as an individual business owner can engage in the following: consulting with the nutrition department of hospitals, hosting cooking classes, accepting the lecturer role in training sessions, supervising television programs, and writing cookbooks.

Differences between the dietitian and registered dietitian professions

By definition, the dietitian is a person who has acquired a dietitian license from a prefectural governor and uses the title of “dietitian” to engage in nutrition guidance and management work. The registered dietitian is a person who has acquired the qualification of a registered dietitian from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and uses the title of “registered dietitian” to instruct and manage nutrition. From these, the difference in the definition is not understood well. Briefly, dietitians provide nutrition guidance and meal management mainly to healthy people. Meanwhile, in addition to the above, the registered dietitian provides nutrition guidance and feeding management to those who need to consider individual symptoms and constitution, such as patients⁴⁾.

Large facilities need a registered dietitian. The Health Promotion Act stipulates that efforts should be made to place a registered dietitian in a “specified feeding facility that provides more than 100 meals at a time or more than 250 meals a day.” The specified feeding facility includes medical insurance institutions, relief facilities, and rehabilitation facilities. Other facilities require at least one registered dietitian and dietitians, namely, “specified feeding that provide more than 300 meals at a time or more than 750 meals a day.” Meanwhile, any “specified feeding facility that supplies food to people in need of medical management more than 300 meals at a time or more than 750 meals a day” must always have a registered dietitian. Even larger feeding facilities require special nutrition management by a registered dietitian or those facilities that continuously provide 500 meals at a time or 1,500 meals a day. In other words, facilities that require special nutritional management and facilities that provide a large number of meals need a registered dietitian⁴⁾.

Distinctiveness of the registered dietitian

As mentioned above, there are various places where dietitians and registered dietitians who are food experts can practice their profession. In addition, there is a wide range of opportunities for registered dietitians to be more active than dietitians. It is more difficult to

qualify as a registered dietitian than as a dietitian. A disadvantage is that there are few situations where the presence of a registered dietitian is mandated, as the law stipulates only “effort should be made.” Although the registered dietitian is a name monopoly, there are few business monopoly parts. Given these facts, employers need to hire a registered dietitian with higher treatment compared with a dietitian. If a business owner prioritizes profitability, then they may employ only one managerial-level dietitian. This scenario is considered one of the peculiarities of the registered dietitian role that tends to result in a closed work environment, and also in a situation where it is difficult to obtain new findings necessary for work. However, in recent years, registered dietitians working at hospitals are increasingly recognized as a member of the nutrition support team³⁾. In disease treatment, nutrition management is crucial, along with surgery and medical treatment. A registered dietitian can play an active part in the formulation of the plan and the explanation of the same to the patients. At present, the number and position of personnel vary depending on the hospital, but just as doctors and nurses have their own specialties and assignment wards, specialist dietitians may also be able to demonstrate their specialties in terms of diseases and organs. Consequently, there will be situations where a number of registered dietitians may be employed in a single workplace. There are also hospitals where registered dietitians routinely work at bedside in wards; that is, in direct contact with patients⁵⁾. In any case, it may become necessary for the registered dietitian to hone their skills and promote their position. It will also be necessary to continue acquiring new specialized knowledge, such as by participating in Japan Dietetics Association seminars⁶⁾. According to the story of a registered dietitian who works in an old hospital, it may not seem to be a medical profession.

As for the division of work between the dietitian and the registered dietitian, there are examples from other countries as reference⁶⁾. In Japan, what can be done by a dietitian can also be performed by a registered dietitian; the law mandates only for special tasks, such as nutrition guidance for patients, to be performed by a registered dietitian. Food management work is possible with either qualification. In Australia, qualifications exist for dietitians and associate dietitians, and the division of labor between the two is clearly established (Table 2)⁷⁾.

Table 2 Comparison of Japanese and Australian schemes for registered dietitians working in a hospital

Item	Japan	Australia*
Types of nutritional licenses	Dietitian Registered dietitian	Associate dietitian Dietitian
Main duties of the registered dietitian*	Nutrition support, nutrition instruction, feeding management	Nutrition support, nutrition instruction
Feeding management, assistance in offering meals, duties as nutrition support team member	Performed by both registered dietitians and dietitians	Performed only by associate dietitians
Ordering, inventory control, menu preparation and adjustment	Performed by both registered dietitians and dietitians	Performed only by associate dietitians
Management level	Each ward (in the case of a large hospital)	Each specialty
Nutritional assessment	Contents are created at each hospital. Performed by registered dietitians	Contents are decided for each disease. Performed by the dietitian
Planning, calculation, and implementation of nutritional support	Performed by registered dietitians and nurses	Conducted by dietitians and nutrition support team members

*Australia does not have registered dietitian qualifications; the comparison here is with the dietitian role.

NST: nutrition support team

Based on the data in reference 6)

The Dietitians Association in Australia is actively engaged as a professional group, committed to demonstrating the therapeutic effects of the dietitian's recommended activities. When publishing results, the Association always appeals to the type of work. In addition, the Association is undertaking activities to improve the level of skills, one of which is regular work evaluation conducted several times a year in the workplace. Even in Japan, work evaluations are conducted for various facilities, occupations, and purposes, but not in a uniform manner across the country. Such a division of labor and awareness of the public may be necessary in Japan. However, these aspects include legal issues and also concern the definition of a dietitian in Japan.

As mentioned above, to secure specialization, there are many opportunities related to the involvement of academic societies⁶). Although title specificity tends to be taken in a negative sense, it may be necessary given that registered dietitians, in many cases, may be the only ones to take leadership roles.

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