

INDEX NO: Practice Direction 16.0  
SUBJECT: Boundaries of Therapeutic Relationships 16.2  
CURRENT VERSION APPROVED: January 25, 2018  
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## **Background**

Our Code of Ethics states:

The dietitian should avoid real or perceived conflict of interest in which her or his professional judgement could be compromised. When circumstances make it impossible to avoid a conflict of interest, it shall be disclosed to the client. <sup>1</sup>

Health care professionals must recognize and understand the differences between a therapeutic or professional relationship and a non-professional relationship. A professional relationship is a planned, goal directed and contractual relationship between a registered dietitian (RD) and a client and/or substitute decision maker. This relationship is established for the purpose of providing safe, ethical and effective care and services to meet the individual needs of each client. In the professional relationship, the needs of the client are foremost. <sup>2,3</sup>

Dietitians are responsible for establishing and managing the boundaries of a professional relationship, regardless of the client's actions or requests. <sup>2</sup>

## **Definitions**

Immediate Family - mother, father, siblings, children, spouse, grandparents and grandchildren. Also included in the above are relations permanently residing in the dietitians' household or with whom the dietitian permanently resides. <sup>4</sup>

Conflict of Interest - occurs when, in the mind of a reasonable person, a dietitian has a personal interest that could improperly influence their professional judgement. <sup>5</sup>

## **Practice Direction**

### **1. Therapeutic relationships with family, friends and co-workers**

It is generally not appropriate for registered dietitians to provide care to immediate family, friends or co-workers, due to the differences between a professional and non-professional relationship as well as the inherent conflict of interest. Ideally immediate family, friends and co-workers should be referred to another RD. This presents a challenge, however, for RDs located in a rural community, RDs conducting group classes or RDs in specialized practice areas (in an acute care or community setting). . Where no other options are available, registered dietitians must manage the situation by:

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- disclosing the relationship to employers, the client's health insurance providers and relevant others, where there may be a conflict of interest
- being aware of the potential for difficulties in maintaining professional boundaries between personal and professional relationships
- taking steps to manage professional boundaries and ensure the client's needs come first in the professional relationship
- assuring clients that information obtained in the course of providing care will remain confidential, even after the professional relationship ceases <sup>2,3,6,7</sup>

Dietitians shall not charge fees for providing dietetic services to immediate family members.

**EXCEPTION:** Where no other registered dietitian, with the specific skills required, is available in the community, a fee may be charged. <sup>4</sup>

## **2. Developing a social relationship with clients, their family members or partners**

Developing a social relationship with clients, their family members or partners creates a dual personal-therapeutic relationship which must be avoided. Developing a social relationship impacts the therapeutic relationship and creates potential for conflict.<sup>3</sup> Issues that can arise for RDs include:

- Maintaining objectivity
- Maintaining confidentiality
- Handling disagreements
- Accepting choices made by the client
- Friends may expect special treatment
- Financial concerns e.g. expectation that services be provided for free or at a reduced rate <sup>8</sup>

## **3. Developing a Social Relationship with a Former Client**

There may be circumstances where developing a social relationship with a former client is appropriate however there are a number of factors for dietitians to consider:

- The nature of the care/services provided
- The duration for which the care/services was provided and the likelihood that care/services will be required in the future
- The amount of time that has lapsed since care/services were provided
- The degree to which the client is emotionally dependent on the dietitian as a result of the previous professional relationship
- The potential impact on the well-being of the client

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In the event that a social relationship develops after the professional relationship has ceased, aspects of the professional relationship must remain in place, such as maintaining confidentiality of personal health information.<sup>2,3,6</sup>

#### **4. Social Media**

Practice Direction 16.10 outlines dietitians' professional responsibilities with respect to social media.

**NOTE:** Further information on Professional Boundaries can be found in Chapter 11 of the Professional Practice Handbook for Dietitian in Manitoba.

#### **References**

1. College of Dietitians of Manitoba (2005). *Code of Ethics for Registered Dietitians*.
2. College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba (2011). *Professional Boundaries for Therapeutic Relationships*.
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4. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba (2002). *Practice Statement: Conflict of Interest in Practice*.
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6. College of Dietitians of Alberta (2008). *Professional Practice Handbook for Dietitians in Alberta, Chapter 12 Professional Boundaries*.
7. College of Physical Therapists of British Columbia (2015). *Where's the Line: Professional Boundaries in a Therapeutic Relationship*.
8. College of Dietitians of Ontario (2017). *Boundary Guidelines for Professional Therapeutic RD-Client Relationships*.