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Karavetian, Mirey and Rizk, Rana, "Development and evaluation of continuing education course in renal nutrition" (2016). All Works. 1247.  
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Development and evaluation of continuing education course in renal nutrition

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVE: Competent renal dietitians are crucial for better patient compliance and clinical outcomes, specifically in critical settings. The aim of this study was to develop and evaluate an evidence-based course in renal dietetics for dietitians working in health care systems where dietetic specialization is absent.

SUBJECTS/METHODS: Fifteen licensed dietitians working with hemodialysis patients in Lebanon were randomly recruited to participate in the course. The latter was developed by the study’s primary investigator, according to evidence-based practice guidelines, and focused on all aspects of renal nutrition. Total course duration was 28 hours spread over a 2 month period. Dietitians’ knowledge in renal nutrition was tested pre- and post-training through a 23-item questionnaire; the total score was expressed in percentage (< 60% score indicated insufficient knowledge). Paired-samples t test was used for statistical analysis.

RESULTS: Overall knowledge of the dietitians significantly improved post-training and reached satisfactory levels (pre: 38.75 ± 17.20%, post: 62.08 ± 21.85%). Sub-analysis of the change in the knowledge showed significant and satisfactory improvement only in 3 topics: 1) correct body weight use in calculations, 2) energy estimation method and 3) phosphorus management. Knowledge in the fluid management significantly improved but did not achieve a satisfactory level.

CONCLUSION: The course significantly improved dietitians’ knowledge in renal nutrition. If adopted as part of the continuing education of dietitians in countries that lack dietetic specializations, it may serve the first step towards improving health care practice.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is a growing public health problem worldwide, posing serious health and economic burden on individuals as well as on the societal and health care systems [1]. Up till now, hemodialysis (HD) remains the dominant form of renal replacement therapy (RRT) [2-4] with an escalating prevalence worldwide [5]. In Lebanon, hospital-based HD is the major form of RRT, with an estimated incidence of 50 cases per million population [6].

Medical nutrition therapy (MNT) is a crucial part in managing HD patients’ health; literature has shown that dietitians are uniquely qualified to deliver MNT and achieve optimal dietary compliance among patients [7]. Specialized dietitian’s practice involves comprehensive patient assessment, followed by delivery of effective intervention and ongoing follow up to manage the multidimensional challenges associated with chronic diseases; in renal patients it involves protein-energy malnutrition, electrolyte imbalances and anemia, to name a few [7-9]. Non-adherence to renal MNT is associated with poor patient outcomes and has tremendous impact on health care systems [10,11]. Nevertheless, these are almost reversed when evidence-based practice guidelines (EBPG) of renal nutrition are implemented in HD care [12]. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) has emphasized the need for additional education and training for dietitians to become competent in the management of renal patients [13]. A few select countries have taken this further by integrating additional dietetic training and examination for the renal nutrition specialty into the professional licensing process [14,15].

With the current situation where many countries lack specialized training programs for renal dietitians, developing a module to teach dietitians on the EBPG-s, and help them improve their practice, is of utmost importance [16]. This study aims to develop and evaluate an evidence-based course in renal dietetics, to be used in countries where the educational system lacks this edge.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Sample
Participants were dietitians working in the HD units selected...
Continuing education course in renal dietetics

for another interventional study [17]. The selection of the HD units was done through a computer generated randomization process from the pool of functional HD units in Lebanon according to the governmental reports. After which, an invitation letter was sent to hospital dietitians explaining the study procedure; also attached was the pre-knowledge questionnaire. The dietitians were asked to send back the filled questionnaire to the primary investigator (PI) if they were willing to take part in the study. Upon receiving the filled questionnaires, the PI contacted the dietitian(s) to arrange the conduct of the course. The protocol of the study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of each participating hospital (MUMK10022011-1).

Eligible dietitians had to be: 1) holder of a bachelor degree in dietetics, 2) licensed in Lebanon and 3) working with HD patients (irrelevant of years of dietetic practice).

Course development and evaluation process

The steps of the course development and evaluation are explained below in detail and illustrated in Fig. 1.

Step 1. Analyze

A focus group discussion was set with a group of renal dietitians (n = 3) working in Lebanon, details of which are included in another publications [18]. They were asked to explain their opinion on the barriers to optimal dietetic care in the HD units in Lebanon. The main barriers to a better implementation of Kidney Disease Outcomes Quality Initiative (KDOQI) dietary guidelines, identified by the dietitians were time constraints and lack of supporting policies within the hospitals, in addition to the insufficient amount of education in renal dietetics in the didactic curriculum provided in Lebanon [18]. Moreover, a national survey was conducted on the practice level and knowledge of dietitians working in HD units in Lebanon, detailed methods and results of which are explained elsewhere [19]. However, the main findings exhibited the level of implementation by dietitians of each KDOQI practice guideline ranging from 10 to 59%; and the average knowledge score of KDOQI guidelines was 35.45% ± 16 [19]. The results of the needs assessment highlighted the necessity for a renal nutrition course to be developed and tailored to the needs of the Lebanese dietitians.

Step 2. Design

The course was designed by the Principal Investigator (PI) who was a dietitian actively practicing renal dietetics and a teacher in various settings (dietetic internship preceptor and academic instructor). Moreover, the PI had been trained on effective methods for adult learning and communication. The learning objectives of the course were divided into theoretical and practical domains and were set according to 2 factors: 1) the knowledge scores retrieved from the national survey, and 2) the level of background knowledge provided by didactic dietetic programs in Lebanon.

To design the course content, the PI conducted a thorough literature review of the guidelines for the nutritional management of CKD by looking into all EBPG-s of renal MNT [20-25].

Step 3. Develop

The educational material was elaborated in English and consisted of 7 chapters covering the multidisciplinary aspects of renal MNT, with specific learning outcomes for each chapter, detailed in Table 1. The order of chapters were set to build a logical trend of ideas that would achieve the learning outcomes of the course. Upon the completion of the first draft, the course was reviewed by an expert dietitian for objective evaluation; after which the course underwent minor modifications. The process of preparing the course and its assessment tools took an estimated 120 hours.

As for the methods of teaching, many methods were incorporated including: lectures using power point presentations and videos to be followed by interactive discussions, in addition to a guided analysis of real life cases for each module covered. The latter was added to foster critical thinking and problem solving abilities among the participants. Finally, homework was planned for each module, consisting of a case study to be solved individually; followed by an individual feedback by the PI. Within each lecture, ideas were first introduced in a rather abstract way, after which they were followed with an elaborative and concrete information of the topic.

The revised version of the course was pilot-tested in a class of dietetic students in an academic setting, after which additional minor modifications, specifically related to the level of detail in each chapter were incorporated, leading to the final version of the course.

Fig. 1. Flow chart on course development
Table 1. Description of the dietetic training module

| Learning outcome for each chapter | Topics covered |
|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Develop a thorough understanding of the pathophysiology of renal failure | Structure and functions of the kidney, Most common kidney diseases, Nephrotic and nephritic syndromes, Nephrolithiasis, Acute kidney injury, CKD (1-5) |
| Explain the process of different RRTs and discuss adequacy of dialysis | Different modalities of RRT, HD and its different types, Peritoneal dialysis and its different types, Renal transplant, Assessment of dialysis adequacy, Parameters that affect dialysis adequacy |
| List and define the complications of renal failure and their medical management | Malnutrition, Epidemiology and assessment, Malnutrition inflammation complex syndrome, Outcomes and prognosis, Fluid accumulation, Hyperkalemia, Pathophysiology, Assessment and diagnosis, Medical management, Renal osteodystrophy and CKD-MBD, Pathophysiology and types of bone diseases, Assessment and diagnosis, Medical management (HD, phosphate binders and vitamin D), Anemia, Pathophysiology and types, Assessment and diagnosis, Medical management and hyporesponsiveness to treatment, Cardiovascular diseases |
| Understand and evaluate the QOL in HD patients | Assessment of QOL, QOL and biochemical parameters, QOL and body composition, QOL and morbidity |
| Provide accurate nutritional assessment and diagnosis in renal failure patients | Anthropometric assessment, Biochemical assessment, Clinical assessment, Dietary assessment (energy, fluids, macronutrients and micronutrients) |
| Understand the basics and plan effective nutrition intervention, monitoring and evaluation of outcomes in renal failure patients | Scope of practice of dietitians and coordination of renal care, MNT of malnutrition, Nutrition recommendations, Use of branched chain ketoacids and interdialytic nutrition (rationale, definition, recommendations and outcomes), MNT of fluids and sodium, Nutrition recommendations, Adequate interdialytic weight gain, Patient oriented advice on restricting fluids and dietary sodium intake, MNT of hyperkalemia, Dietary planning and management, MNT of hyperphosphatemia and CKD-MBD, 1. Dietary planning and management, 2. Choice and management of phosphate binder therapy, Demineralization of foods, MNT of anemia, MNT of comorbidities, CVD and therapeutic lifestyle changes, Diabetes, Effect of exercise on HD, Introduction to MNT in peritoneal dialysis and renal transplant patients |
| Develop strong nutrition education and counseling skills in chronically ill patients | Health behavioral counseling theories and models, Effective communication, Motivational interviewing, Behavior modification, Role of the clinician in behavioral change |

CKD, chronic kidney disease; RRT, renal replacement therapy; CKD-MBD, chronic kidney disease-mineral bone disorder; HD, hemodialysis; QOL, quality of life; MNT, medical nutrition therapy; CVD, cardiovascular diseases
Step 4. Implement

The course consisted of 7 sessions (1 session/week). Each session lasted 4 hours: 3 hours of interactive lectures using PowerPoint presentations followed by a 1-hour of case-based teaching and discussion. Overall, the dietitians received a cumulative 28 hours of training over a 2-month period. The dietitians did not receive other professional trainings during the course of the study.

The training was done in groups of 3. All groups followed an identical sequence (pre-training test, training, post-training test) and received the same module, although their trainings started at different times. The groups of 3 were chosen primarily because the training was conducted at the dietitians’ worksites (dietary departments of the hospitals) for feasibility purposes. Moreover, small groups were chosen for better interaction. At the end of each session the PI conducted a brief recap of the covered content. All training materials were provided in soft copy to participants at the beginning of the course to enable the dietitians to revise the material after each session.

Outcome measure

Knowledge questionnaire

A 23-item questionnaire assessing the knowledge of the dietitians in renal MNT was used (Table 2). The questions were adapted from Vergili & Wolf [26]. The original questionnaire assessed practice patterns of renal dietitians; thus minor modifications were done to adapt it to the current study objectives. All questions that did not address renal nutrition EBPGs were removed; such as questions on demographics, patient workload to name a few. The rest of the questions in the original questionnaire assessed the level of use of each renal nutrition EBPGs in routine practice; thus rewording of each question was done, in order to transform them into knowledge assessors of EBPGs. The original language (English) of the questionnaire was maintained since dietitians in Lebanon are fluent in English. The modified version was shared with the primary author for feedback from the pilot was incorporated to produce the final version.

The questionnaire evaluated the knowledge of dietitians in the following topics: 1) Body weight: assessment of body weight and use of appropriate weight for nutrient calculations; 2) Energy: estimation of energy needs; 3) Fluids: assessment of status and estimation of needs; assessment of 4) Diabetes and 5) Acid-Base Balance (serum bicarbonate); assessment of serum status and estimation of needs for 6) Potassium and 7) Phosphorus. All questions were closed-ended with multiple answer choices.

For each question, a score of 0 or 1 was given indicating a wrong/unanswered or correct answer, respectively. For questions with multiple correct answers, a partial grade was given for each correct answer; whereby the total of correct answers of that question added up to 1. The total score for each participant was calculated by summing the scores received on each question. The total actual score was then divided by the maximal total score and displayed as a percentage: [(total actual score/total maximal score)*100]. A minimum passing grade of 60% was used; this cut-off grade was adapted from academia. Furthermore, a sub-score was calculated for each of the 7 assessed topics, and was displayed as a percentage: [(actual score for the topic/total maximal score for the topic)*100]. Within a topic, each question contributed equally to the sub-score, since the knowledge of each is equally important; within the whole questionnaire, topics that were more complex had more questions and thus higher weights on the total score.

Participants filled the questionnaire pre- and post-training. The PI did not review the knowledge questionnaire with any of the dietitians and correct answers were not conveyed during the training.

Statistics analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 21, 2012, IBM inc., Armonk, New York, United States). Descriptive analysis was conducted for the demographic data. Paired samples t-test was used for the study outcomes. A p-value of 0.05 was used for statistical significance at a 95% confidence interval level.

Table 2. The knowledge questionnaire (correct answers are indicated with their reference)

1) Body Weight

|        | Female | Male          |
|--------|--------|---------------|
|        | Hamwi formula |               |
| IBW    | (Ht -152 cm) x 2.3 kg + 45.5 kg | IBW = (Ht -152 cm) x 2.7 kg + 48 kg |
|        | 2.54 cm | 2.54 cm       |

- NHANES II weight chart (SBW) [21]
- Metropolitan Life Insurance Company table 1983
- BMI (i.e., the BW that corresponds to a certain BMI, such as 23.6-24 or 22-25)
- Other (specify) _________________________________________________
- Don’t know

2. How do you usually determine adult HD patient’s edema free BW?

- By using the following formula to estimate actual body water: 142 mEq/L*Normal Total Body Water (L)/Pre Dialysis Serum sodium (mEq/L) [21]
- The nephrologist determines it
- Not sure

The term “aBW” in the following questions means the BW you may use to calculate nutrient requirements for your over- and under-weight patients. Here, it does not refer to adjustments you might make for your patients with amputations.
Table 2. continued

| Question | Options | Notes |
|----------|---------|-------|
| 3. Do you usually use an “aBW” to calculate protein and calorie requirements for your overweight patients? | | |
| | Yes [21] | No → Skip to 6 |
| 4. Please indicate the degree of overweight your HD patients must be before you “adjust” their BW: | | |
| | > 115% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW [21] | > 120% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW |
| | > 125% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW | > 130% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW |
| | Other (specify) | |
| 5. Which formula do you usually use to calculate the aBW for your HD overweight patients? | | |
| | aBW = edema free BW + [ (SBW - edema free BW) x 0.25 ] (KDOQI formula) [21] | aBW = IBW + [(Actual BW - IBW) x 0.25] (“traditional” formula) |
| | aBW = IBW + [(Actual BW - IBW) x 0.25] (KDOQI formula) [21] | |
| | Other (specify) | |
| | Not sure | |
| 6. If you answered No to question 3, please indicate which weight you usually use to calculate protein and calorie requirements for your overweight HD patients: | | |
| | Patient’s actual edema free BW | Patient’s estimated dry BW |
| | Patient’s healthy, ideal or standard BW [23] | Other (specify) |
| 7. Do you usually use an “aBW” to calculate protein and calorie requirements for your underweight HD patients? | | |
| | Yes [21] | No → Skip to 10 |
| 8. Please indicate the degree of underweight your patients must be before you “adjust” their BW: | | |
| | < 95% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW [21] | < 90% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW |
| | < 85% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW | < 80% of their healthy, ideal or standard BW |
| | Other (specify) | |
| 9. Which formula do you usually use to calculate aBW for underweight HD patients? | | |
| | aBW = IBW + [(Actual BW - IBW) x 0.25] (“traditional” formula) | aBW = IBW + [(Actual BW - IBW) x 0.25] (KDOQI formula) [21] |
| | aBW = edema free BW + [(SBW - edema free BW) x 0.25] (KDOQI formula) [21] | |
| | Other: Specify: | |
| | Note Sure | |
| 10. If you answered no to question 7, please indicate which weight you usually use to calculate protein and calorie requirements for your underweight patients: | | |
| | Patient’s actual edema free BW | Don’t know |
| | Patient’s estimated dry BW | |
| | Patient’s healthy, ideal or standard BW [23] | Other (specify) |

2. Energy

| Question | Options | Notes |
|----------|---------|-------|
| 1. Which formula or equation do you use to estimate calorie requirements for your normal weight HD patients? | | |
| | 25 kcal/kg/day | 30 kcal/kg/day |
| | 35 kcal/kg/day | 40-45 kcal/kg/day |
| | Harris-Benedict equation with adjustment factor(s) for metabolic stress and/or activity | |
| | An average of values derived from 2 or more different formulas; specify the formulas/equations you average: | |
| | Other (specify): | |
| 2. Which formula or equation do you use to estimate calorie requirements for your overweight HD? | | |
| | 20-25 kcal/kg/day [23] | 30-35 kcal/kg/day |
| | 40-45 kcal/kg/day | |
| | Harris-Benedict equation with adjustment factor(s) for metabolic stress, activity and/or weight-loss | |
| | An average of values derived from 2 or more different formulas; specify the formulas/equations you average: | |
| | Other (specify): | |
| 3. Which formula or equation do you use to estimate calorie requirements for your underweight HD? | | |
| | 20-25 kcal/kg/day | 30-35 kcal/kg/day |
| | 40-45 kcal/kg/day | |
| | Harris-Benedict equation with adjustment factor(s) for metabolic stress, activity and/or weight-gain | |
| | An average of values derived from 2 or more different formulas; specify the formulas/equations you average: | |
| | Other (specify): | |
| 3. Fluids

| Question | Options | Notes |
|----------|---------|-------|
| 1. What do you usually recommend to your patients with little or no urine output regarding their daily fluid intake? | | |
| | 500 mL + volume of urine output | 750 mL + volume of urine output |
| | 1000 mL + volume of urine output [21] | 1200 mL + volume of urine output |
| | Depends on the patient (e.g., body size) | I don’t address fluid restriction with patients |
| | Other (specify) | |
| 2. Which “rule of thumb” or formula do you usually use when advising your patients with little or no urine output on fluid weight gain goals? | | |
| | 1-2 kilograms between treatments | 1-3 kilograms between treatments |
| | 2-3 kilograms between treatments | Up to 4% of estimated dry BW between treatments [21] |
| | Up to 5% of estimated dry BW between treatments | Depends on the patient (e.g., amount of fluid removal tolerated) |
| | I don’t address fluid weight gain goals with patients | |
| | Other (specify) | |
RESULTS

Participants’ characteristics
Fifteen dietitians attended and completed the training. They were all Lebanese and females. Their mean age in years was 25.4 and their mean years of experience was 3.07. Twelve of these dietitians had a master’s degree in human nutrition and dietetics and none of them was specialized in any domain of nutrition. The characteristics of participating dietitians are available in Table 3.

Knowledge in renal dietetics

| Table 3. Characteristics of study participants | Mean ± SD | Min - Max |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Age (yrs)                                      | 25.4 ± 2.73 | 23 - 31 |
| Experience in dietetics (yrs)                  | 3.07 ± 2.6  | 1 - 10  |
| Total Hours of work in the hospital            | 26.2 ± 9.7  | 20 - 43 |
| Hours of work only in the HD units             | 13.6 ± 8.2  | 3 - 20  |

SD: standard deviation

Following the training, mean knowledge scores of the dietitians improved significantly and were slightly above the cut-off point for satisfactory knowledge (60%) (Table 4). The sub-analysis showed that the knowledge of the dietitians significantly improved only in 4 topics: 1) Body Weight: pre/post:

| Renal nutrition guidelines | Pre- training | Post- training | P-value |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------|
| Mean (%) ± SD (n = 15)     | Mean (%) ± SD (n = 15) |             |
| Body weight                | 43.33 ± 23.80 | 65.33 ± 31.81 | 0.008   |
| Energy                     | 42.22 ± 42.66 | 75.55 ± 34.42 | 0.019   |
| Fluids                     | 10.00 ± 20.70 | 50.00 ± 37.79 | < 0.001 |
| Phosphorus                 | 47.11 ± 29.35 | 71.55 ± 27.13 | 0.021   |
| Potassium                  | 43.33 ± 12.27 | 48.88 ± 9.99  | 0.207   |
| Diabetes                   | 13.33 ± 22.88 | 26.66 ± 31.99 | 0.104   |
| Acid-base                  | 0             | 13.33 ± 35.18 | 0.164   |
| Total score                | 38.75 ± 17.20 | 62.08 ± 21.85 | < 0.001 |

P-value based on paired-samples t-test, SD: standard deviation

Adapted with permission from Vergili & Wolfe [24]

HD, hemodialysis; BW, body weight; IBW, ideal body weight; SBW, standard body weight; BMI, body mass index; aBW, adjusted body weight; aBWef, adjusted edema free body weight; E, energy; A1c, glycated haemoglobin; K, potassium
43.33 ± 23.80%/ 65.33 ± 31.81%; 2) Energy: pre/post: 42.22 ± 42.66%/ 75.55 ± 34.42%; 3) Phosphorus: pre/post: 47.11 ± 29.35%/ 71.55 ± 27.13% and 4) Fluids: pre/post: 10.00 ± 20.70%/50.00 ± 37.79%, but the latter did not reach the satisfactory knowledge cut-off point.

DISCUSSION

This study was first of its kind in the region to develop an educational module that covered all aspects of renal dietetics and assess its effect on the knowledge attained. The course material and intensity were tailored to the participating dietitians’ academic educational level. In a region where specialized dietetic training is completely absent, and following a recent publication by Karavetian et al. [19] highlighting the inadequate knowledge of Lebanese dietitians in renal nutrition, the current study stands as a potential partial solution to the current situation.

The results of this study showed that the dietitians started with a low knowledge level, which significantly improved post-training. This highlights the shortfall of the education and training in renal nutrition provided by the dietetic curriculum and internships in Lebanon. The significant improvement in knowledge denotes the effectiveness of the training, but the score of 62% is barely satisfactory. We assume that a 2-month training, consisting of only 7 sessions is adequate in increasing dietitians’ knowledge, but is not enough for enabling them to reach advanced knowledge in renal nutrition care and master skills required for the complex management of renal patients. This might be enhanced by increasing the course duration and its practice-based content. The latter has shown to be effective in improving skills and implementation of new guidelines by health-care practitioners [27].

This article describes an effort to address dietetic specialization in Lebanon and the neighboring countries with a similar dietetic educational level. The reason why the study was conducted in this country is due to its regional pioneer position in the field of higher education, specifically in nutrition [28]. Lebanon was the first country in the region to develop a university program and supervised internships in dietetics [29]; and pioneered in initiating the AND-accredited coordinated program in dietetics [30]. After which, this experience has extended to the rest of the Arab world step by step [31]. This leads to the assumption that if a program is validated in Lebanon, it can easily be adopted by the others in the region.

For an optimal integration of the module to other countries, 1) integrating this module within a specialized post-baccalaureate internship, 2) establishing a health practice accreditation system that periodically audits the knowledge and standards of practice of dietitians working with renal patients and 3) establish a professional development model, as the one adopted in Australia, is also proposed, where a post graduate short course in renal nutrition is offered for dietitians [37]. Finally, web-based (online) learning could be a novel means for dietitians willing to specialize in renal nutrition, such as AND’s Online Certificate in CKD Nutrition Management [38] or the Nutrition Management Training Program provided by the National Kidney Disease Education Program (NKDEP) [39].

Although the dietitians were given the option to opt out of the study at any time, the 100% completion rate may indicate that participants were satisfied by the module; however, follow-up studies are needed to provide a rigorous assessment of the overall satisfaction and self-efficacy following this training. The current study assessed the knowledge of the dietitians regarding international EBPG-s. Some of the answers in the questionnaire might not be directly applicable to the Lebanese patients. However, these answers were retained as they represent the best possible solution, considering the scarcity of renal nutrition guidelines in this part of the world. The wide spread of answers exhibited by large standard deviations might be attributed to the small sample size (large samples tend to have smaller standard errors). Adequately powered sample with further statistical analysis should be also used to ensure validity and to generalizability of the module to the region. Future studies should also assess whether improved knowledge of the dietitians will lead to improved implementation of EBPG-s in their routine practice and better patient outcomes. This was previously questioned in the literature; a barrier-analysis survey of renal dietitians reported that almost all of them were aware of the KDOQI guidelines, yet only 5% succeeded in implementing them all [40].

In conclusion, this study pioneers in suggesting a key solution for the enhancement of renal nutrition practice and the dietetic profession, in the Arab region.

As a step forward in this mission to ensure high quality care to HD patients and their families, authors of this study suggest the following roadmap to developing renal dietetic specialization: 1) integrating this module within a specialized post-baccalaureate internship, 2) establishing a health practice accreditation system that periodically audits the knowledge and standards of practice of dietitians working with renal patients and 3) establish a...
system of obligatory continuing education to maintain license to practice in this field.

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