Characteristics of ethical issues versus poor business practices

The ADA Standards of Professional Practice for Dietetics Professionals (1) relates to business practices from two venues: the relationship between client and professional and that between professionals. The standards address both professional and management acumen in the delivery of quality services and practice. Measurement of these standards in relation to business practice is reflected in outcomes addressing satisfaction with service and products provided, and the use of resources based on a business plan and a budget.

The Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics (2) defines ethical behaviors that support the best interests of consumers and provides guidelines on how dietetics professionals should conduct their practices with clients, colleagues, and other professionals. Adherence to the Standards of Professional Practice, along with the Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics should assist the practitioner in ensuring competence in practice. However, the Code of Ethics should not be used to resolve business practice disputes between practitioners, other health care professionals, or consumers.

In addition to these two documents, other resources address ethics and business. Sobal (3) identified ethical issues relevant to nutrition educators, including ethical problems in relationships with clients, policy and program development, and public communication about nutrition. Hermann (4) addressed the expanding business links that dietetics professionals can make to the business world.

This article provides a distinction between unethical behavior and poor business practices. Good business practice is based on a conceptual model of interacting activities that influence the quality of a product or service in various stages ranging from the identification of needs or services, to the assessment of whether these needs or services have been satisfied or provided. Poor business practice relates to not producing a product or service based on the overall business process not meeting standards or failing. The causes of failing business processes are numerous and require an in-depth analysis of the organizational structure and desired quality outcomes, hopefully based on best business practice benchmarks. Unethical behavior requires an understanding of what really is good or bad, right or wrong. Unethical behavior results from actions that violate or fail to consider core values and obligations. The actions are contrary to common ethical standards (like a code of ethics) adopted by society to assure professionals conduct themselves according to acceptable societal practice (5,6).

Ethical dilemmas in business and consultation may occur between a professional and a client or between two professionals. These dilemmas may manifest in the areas of confidentiality, promotion and endorsement of products, conflicts of interests, and recognizing and exercising professional judgment.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Example #1 An example of an ethical dilemma involving two professionals:

A dietetics professional in private practice has a diverse client population, including HIV-positive clients. Clients, who are friends of other clients, ask the practitioner about their friends’ diagnosis and prognosis.

What is the connection to ethical principles in the ADA Code of Ethics? It relates to Principle #7, which addresses confidentiality. As the court said in T.C. Theatre Corp. v Warner Bros Pictures, “An integral purpose of the rule of confidentiality is to encourage clients to fully and freely disclose to the professional they are seeking services from all facts pertinent to their cause with absolute assurance that such information will not be shared with others or used to their disadvantage” (7).

BUSINESS DILEMMAS

Example #1 A professional not adhering to the ADA Standards of Professional Practice:

A consumer sees an RD for nutrition consultation and is unhappy with the interaction because educational materials provided during the session were not professional and suitable, as per the consumer’s impression.

Standard #1 (Provision of Services) dictates that the professional: “fosters excellence and exhibits professionalism in practice” and “collaborates with client to assess needs, background and resources to establish mutual goals” (1). The client had an expectation to receive...
education related to the issue that initiated a nutrition consultation. It is standard practice to provide education materials to supplement what is said in the consultation for the client to use at home. Best practice implies the education materials are accurate and reflect evidence-based literature and are understandable to the client.

**Example #2** A professional violating the ADA Standards of Professional Practice in three different practice scenarios:

a) A dietitian fails to meet a client for a follow-up appointment; the client waits for a half hour before leaving; b) a consumer states that charges for services are excessive as compared to other dietetics practitioners; and c) the client requests a written consultation to a referring physician to ensure continuity of care, which is not done.

The indicators not taken into account for Standard #5 (Quality of Practice) are: "documents outcomes of services, continuously evaluates and refines services based on measured outcomes" (1). Quality is achieved when the features and characteristics of a product or service satisfy stated or implied needs. In each of these brief statements quality is violated based on practice outcomes that are inconsistent with standard benchmarks of quality practice. These minimum standards of service are expected by peers and consumers and should be provided consistently.

**WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?**

A business plan that is developed using the Standards of Professional Practice and the Code of Ethics as a foundation promotes ethical behavior and limits poor business practices. Whether you are working in clinical dietetics (in a larger institutional setting or in a private practice arena), production and service, administration, or in a staff position, a business plan can advise and justify to administer your vision and the requirements of your profession to run both an efficient and ethical practice. A business plan will describe your business philosophy, policies, and procedures.

In accordance with Standard #6 of the Standards of Professional Practice (1), Continued Competence and Professional Accountability, the dietetics professional can ensure the desired outcomes by:

- using self-reflection and feedback from a variety of sources to evaluate and implement professional change;
- accepting accountability to the public; and
- using "best practices" to demonstrate competency.

These can be achieved through professional development activities that support lifelong learning, as documented in the Professional Development Portfolio process (8), membership and leadership in ADA Dietetic Practice Groups, participation in mentoring programs, and continued formal education beyond entry level requirements.

**CONCLUSION**

The concept of professional responsibility aimed at competence in practice is codified in ADA’s Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics (9). As dietetics professional it is essential to use the tools available to ensure that daily professional activities are in compliance with the Standards of Professional Practice, which outline benchmark standards for quality practice. In addition, when a decision is not clear in your mind use the ADA Code of Ethics to guarantee you are complying with these principles. Violations of either are important to identify and require self-reflection and education to ensure the “best practice” model is a benchmark for all dietetics professionals.

Dietetics practitioners involved in business practice can use Web-based resources to achieve their professional development goals, leading to and supporting good business practice and ethical conduct. Some suggestions are listed below:

- http://www.sba.gov/training/courses.html
- http://www.eatright.org/Member/ProductCatalog/90_10481.cfm
- http://www.eatright.org/Member/90_7525.cfm

**References**