

The Case for Independent Prescribing Rights for UK Dietitians

Introduction:

Dietitians are statutorily registered healthcare professionals uniquely qualified to assess, diagnose, and treat diet and nutrition problems at both individual and public health levels. Despite their expertise, dietitians in the UK currently lack independent prescribing rights, limiting their ability to provide timely and comprehensive care. Granting independent prescribing rights to eligible dietitians would enhance patient outcomes, streamline care pathways, and optimise the utilisation of the NHS workforce. This document presents a compelling case for introducing independent prescribing rights for dietitians, highlighting the benefits for patients, the NHS, and the dietetic profession.

Why, the value and our message:

Independent prescribing rights for dietitians would significantly improve patient care and experience. By enabling dietitians to prescribe medicines independently, patients would have quicker access to necessary treatments, reducing delays by up to 7-14 days in some cases. This would prevent unnecessary appointments and handoffs between healthcare professionals, enhancing convenience for patients and enabling more dietitian-led clinics and services closer to home. A 2013 survey found that 70% of dietitians believed independent prescribing would benefit patient care through improved access to medicines.

Introducing independent prescribing rights for dietitians would also result in substantial cost savings for the NHS. It would enable more efficient use of expensive specialist medicines, reduce duplicative appointments with doctors and consultants, and allow for the shifting of some services into community settings with lower-cost dietitian prescribers. In particular, independent prescribing could reduce wastage and the need for emergency home parenteral nutrition deliveries, driving major cost savings.

Safety and Professional Considerations:

Eligible dietitians are already supplementary prescribers and use medicines appropriately. Rigorous accredited training programmes ensure prescribing competency, and granting independent prescribing rights would require similarly stringent training as has been in place since 2003. This would establish clearer lines of responsibility compared to the current practice of advising doctors on medicines.

Independent prescribing rights would only apply to eligible dietitians, bringing legislation in line with current advanced practice and policy. Similar allowances already exist for nurses, pharmacists, and other allied health professionals (AHPs). The British Dietetic Association estimates that 40-50% of the approximately 1,000 advanced practice dietitians in England would undertake prescribing training if permitted.

Workforce Efficiency:

Granting independent prescribing rights to dietitians would optimise the NHS workforce by making fuller use of the skills of the advanced dietetic workforce. It would facilitate service redesign, such as advanced dietitian-led clinics in hospitals and the community, and free up doctors' time for complex cases. Additionally, enabling independent prescribing could allow better utilisation of the 1,243 private sector dietitians.

Tactics:

- **Advocate for legislative change:** The British Dietetic Association should collaborate with key stakeholders, including government officials, healthcare organisations, and other professional bodies, to advocate for the necessary legislative changes to grant independent prescribing rights to eligible dietitians.
- **Develop a comprehensive training programme:** In collaboration with educational institutions and regulatory bodies, the British Dietetic Association should develop a rigorous, accredited training programme for independent prescribing, ensuring that dietitians acquire the necessary competencies and skills.
- **Raise awareness among healthcare professionals:** The British Dietetic Association should engage in a targeted awareness campaign to educate healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and other AHPs, about the benefits of independent prescribing for dietitians and its potential to improve patient care and NHS efficiency.
- **Promote public understanding:** The British Dietetic Association should launch a public information campaign to raise awareness of the role of dietitians and the benefits of independent prescribing rights, emphasising the potential for improved access to care, reduced waiting times, and enhanced patient outcomes.

When:

The campaign for independent prescribing rights for dietitians should be launched immediately, with a phased approach to implementation:

- **Short-term (1-2 years):** Secure legislative changes and develop the necessary training programmes and competency frameworks.
- **Medium-term (2-5 years):** Roll out training programmes and gradually introduce independent prescribing for eligible dietitians, focusing initially on key areas such as parenteral nutrition and specialist clinics.
- **Long-term (5+ years):** Expand independent prescribing to all eligible dietitians across various settings, and continuously monitor and evaluate the impact on patient outcomes, NHS efficiency, and the dietetic profession.

Conclusion:

Granting independent prescribing rights to eligible dietitians is a crucial step towards improving patient care, optimising the NHS workforce, and enhancing the role of

dietitians within the healthcare system. By enabling dietitians to prescribe medicines independently, patients will benefit from quicker access to necessary treatments, streamlined care pathways, and more convenient services closer to home. The NHS will realise significant cost savings through reduced wastage, fewer duplicative appointments, and the shifting of services to lower-cost community settings. The dietetic profession will be empowered to make fuller use of their skills and expertise, leading to improved job satisfaction and retention.

The British Dietetic Association calls upon the government, healthcare organisations, and all relevant stakeholders to support this vital campaign. By working together to introduce independent prescribing rights for dietitians, we can build a more efficient, effective, and patient-centred healthcare system that leverages the full potential of the dietetic workforce.

REFERENCES:

Morris, S (2014) 'Case of need for supplementary prescribing by advanced dietitians.' *NHS England*.

Allied Health Professions Medicines Project Team (2016) 'Summary of the responses to the public consultation on proposals to introduce supplementary prescribing by dietitians across the United Kingdom'. *NHS England*.

Tapley, S (2023) 'Dietitians as non-medical prescribers. *Network Health Digest*

By Alex Ehrlich (Public Affairs Officer)