

Ik ben diëtist!

I'm a dietitian!

I graduated as a dietitian (BSc.) at University College Ghent in 1999 and received a master's degree in food and dietary science from Ghent University in 2002. Since 2003 I've been lecturer at the Faculty of Health Care from University College Ghent where I'm head of the department Nutrition and dietetics. Currently I hold a half-time research mandate and I'm working on a PhD.

The study programme in nutrition and dietetics at University College Ghent was actually founded in 1950 being the first school for dietitians in Belgium. Nowadays a program to qualify as a professional bachelor in nutrition and dietetics is offered at 11 university colleges (7 in the Flemish speaking part of Belgium, 4 in the French speaking part). All programs adopted the binary system for higher education (BaMA) and consist of a 3 year tract comprising 180 credits (ECTS).

In Belgium only the paramedic field of the profession is protected by law (this is the clinical part in nutrition and dietetics). The national requirements are described in a Royal Decree from 1997 regarding the professional title of "Dietitian" and the qualifications required for the exercise of the profession of dietician. One of the requirements is to maintain professional knowledge and skills through lifelong learning. To date however no accreditation system for practising dietitians is active. Also as a result of the legislation no legal boundaries are



financial reimbursement by the social security system is very limited. In Belgium dietitians are represented by 2 professional associations; the Flemish Vlaamse Beroepsvereniging van Voedingsdeskundigen en Diëtisten (VBVD: 600 members) and the French Union Professionnelle des diplômés en Diététique de Langue Française (UPDLF: 220 members). Both associations are members of EFAD and are active in addressing some of the issues mentioned before.

In 2007 the National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance counted a total of 1330 registered dietitians for a population of about 10.6 million inhabitants. Own research performed in 2006 in 303 Flemish dietitians working at the clinical level (691 invited, response rate 44%) showed that about 60% works part-time, about half of the dietitians work independently (in a single or joined practice), 30% in a hospital working mainly in residential care and 20% in a hospital working mainly with outpatients. More than 90% of the respondents considered an evidence-based advice to be important, however only 25% claimed to have the right information at the right time. This finding suggests the need for further development of dietetic protocols in order to harmonize dietetic therapy across Belgium. Nevertheless for three main

applicable for conditions (diabetes, obesity and dyslipidemia) nutrition intervention protocols are available. A survey conducted in 2004 by the Scientific Institute of Public Health shows that 1.5% of the male and 2.9% of the female Belgian population (corrected for age) had contacted a dietitian at least once during the preceding 12 months. The same survey showed a prevalence of overweight (BMI>25) in the adult Belgian population of 50.6% in men and 37.8% in women.

In Belgium the proportion of foreigners is about 8% of the total population. The most important ethnic minorities with notable different eating habits are Moroccan and Turkish. For these communities the Flemish food based dietary guidelines are tailored by the Flemish Institute for Health Promotion to meet the respective customs related to differences in religion and culture.

For the past 5 decades in Belgium the profession of a dietitian has changed quite a bit, not in the least in terms of education. One constant seems to be present in this evolution, and that would be dynamism. As dietitians we need to constantly adopt ourselves to an ever shifting frame of knowledge in what is known about that mysterious relation between nutrition and health.

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