

## I am a Dietitian....



Edel McNamara,  
Ireland

Ireland is a small country with a population of 4.5 million. Dietetics is a well established profession in this country. Dietitians were first employed in our health services in the 1940's. Initially, dietitians in Ireland were mainly administrative, managing catering services in hospitals and large institutions. Demand for clinical dietitians slowly grew, and by the early 1970s, clinical dietitians were employed by the health service in hospitals to use their extensive knowledge of nutrition to help improve or treat a number of medical conditions.

The Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute (INDI) is the professional organisation for dietitians in Ireland. Founded in 1968, the Institute has grown steadily and it now represents over just under 600 dietitians throughout Ireland as well as having members world-wide. The INDI's mission is to encourage, foster and maintain the highest possible standards in the science and practice of human nutrition and

dietetics, to positively influence the nutrition status and health of the individual and the population in general. INDI has a council of 12 elected members who are voted in on an annual basis to work on behalf of INDI members. There are also 12 Special Interest Groups, plus a range of other committees and individuals involved in areas like PR, Communications, Continuous Professional Development and Education, to name just a few.

Dietitians are employed in many different areas in Ireland, although the majority work either in hospital or in the community setting. In hospitals, they work as part of a multidisciplinary team, where they assess the nutritional status of patients, calculate individual nutritional requirements, design a plan of care to meet these nutritional requirements and educate patients/families on special and health promoting diets or nutrition support.

Community Dietitians are involved in promoting and maintaining a healthy nutritional status of the population. Generally speaking, community dietitians in Ireland are involved in both health promotion work and clinical work in non acute settings. They work with multidisciplinary teams e.g. GPs, nurses and other health professionals in non acute setting. For health promotion work, they link with people from a wide range of settings (e.g. preschools, schools, workplaces etc.) and with different population groups (e.g. minority groups, older people, young people etc.).

Some dietitians work directly for a food manufacturer, retailer or pharmaceutical company. The role of the dietitian here is to give unbiased advice on nutrition, product development, production of nutritional literature, and respond to customer concerns. Additional areas of employment include education, sports, private practice, policy development, advocacy and media and research. Many INDI members pursue research either full time or within their area of work. An annual study day provides a platform to showcase ongoing research within the profession.

In 1995 I graduated from the only undergraduate course in the Republic of Ireland that provides a qualification allowing individuals to practice as dietitians - BSc Human Nutrition and Dietetics. This is a conjoint course between University of Dublin, Trinity College, and the Dublin Institute of Technology. Since then I have completed research (PhD), lectured in the Dublin Institute of Technology and I currently work as a dietitian in the community setting. I really enjoy working in the community as a dietitian. I work as part of a larger Health Promotion Department, where other health promotion personnel (tobacco, workplace, physical activity, women's health etc.) are employed. My job is very diverse, ranging from one-

to-one patient counselling to training staff from a variety of settings. I'm fortunate because I get to meet lots of interesting people and work with people from many different professions and backgrounds.

The number of dietitians working in Ireland (particularly in the community setting) has increased substantially in the last 15 years, thanks to determined lobbying work of members of the professional body. Very active PR on behalf of INDI, particularly in the past 10 years, has improved our profile nationally. The success of the profession in this country is due to the active voluntary role that many of our members play in the organisations council, special interest groups and numerous committees.