

Editorial

Invisible Pillars of Healthcare System

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In recent years, the field of Food Science and Nutrition has undergone a quiet yet profound transformation in India. From being a largely peripheral concern in mainstream healthcare, it is now emerging as a cornerstone of preventive medicine and public health. However, this rising awareness stands in stark contrast to the structural challenges that continue to undermine the status and professional advancement of dietitians and nutritionists across the country.

India is at a critical juncture. The prevalence of malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and lifestyle related disorders such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease remains alarmingly high. According to NFHS-5 (2021), over 35% of Indian children under five are stunted, and obesity rates are increasing rapidly, particularly among urban populations.¹ Addressing such diverse challenges requires a multi-pronged approach and at its core must be qualified experts in food science and nutrition.

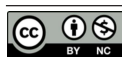
Despite the pressing need, the systemic undervaluation of nutrition professionals persists. Thousands of qualified dietitians and nutritionists graduate annually from reputable institutions across the country, yet unemployment and underemployment remain significant issues. Government healthcare facilities often lack sanctioned posts for these professionals, or the recruitment process is sporadic and unclear. In many district hospitals, for example, there is either no designated dietitian or the post remains vacant for years due to administrative apathy.²

Moreover, the working conditions for those employed are often far from ideal. A majority of these professionals are women, and they frequently face low pay scales, lack of career advancement, minimal job security, and even workplace harassment. The absence of clear professional regulations or a central licensing authority has made the sector vulnerable to exploitation and inconsistency in quality standards.²

On the other hand, India is home to a number of academic institutions offering high-quality education in this domain. Universities such as SNDT Women's University, Avinashilingam Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, and several central and state universities offer Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. programs in Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Science.³ These institutions are producing well-trained professionals who contribute not just to clinical care, but also to policymaking, public health campaigns, and corporate wellness initiatives.

Encouragingly, public perception is shifting. No longer are dietitians seen solely as "weight loss experts" or hospital staff. Instead, they are being recognized for their role in managing chronic diseases, improving maternal and child nutrition, and promoting healthy lifestyle interventions. The rise of digital health platforms, tele-nutrition, fitness apps, and personalized wellness services has further expanded their reach, especially among urban youth.⁴

In addition, policy-level recognition is gradually growing. Initiatives like POSHAN Abhiyaan, Eat Right India, and mid-day meal



schemes have begun to incorporate nutritional science into their frameworks.⁵ However, these programs often suffer from poor implementation, and nutrition professionals are rarely given leadership roles in planning or monitoring.

TOTRULYLEVERAGETHEPOTENTIALOF THIS FIELD, INDIA NEEDS TO:

1. Establish a national regulatory body for dietitians and nutritionists to standardize education, registration, and ethical practice.
2. Create more employment opportunities in both public and private healthcare, as well as in schools, research institutes, food industries, and community health programs.
3. Ensure safe and equitable working conditions, especially for women, who form the backbone of this profession.
4. Foster interdisciplinary collaboration, enabling nutritionists to work closely with doctors, psychologists, community workers, and policy makers.
5. Invest in nutrition literacy at the grassroots level, using dietitians as change agents in rural and urban communities alike.

Dietitians, nutritionists, food technologists, and community health workers are the often-unseen yet indispensable pillars supporting India's nutritional infrastructure. These professionals bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and everyday health practices translating dietary guidelines into actionable

plans for hospitals, schools, public health programs, and even digital wellness platforms.⁶ Their work spans clinical dietetics, nutrition counseling, therapeutic meal planning, maternal and child health, sports nutrition, and food safety. Yet, their contributions remain underrecognized, underpaid, and institutionally marginalized despite being vital to achieving India's public health goals.

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