

Protecting Yourself as a Nutritional Consultant

By Ryan N. Harrison, MA

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The practice of nutritional counseling is a serious and significant vocation. Even should a person disregard easily available statistics, which point to ever-increasing health problems related to diet and lifestyle, a cursory look at people anywhere in the United States reveals that nutritional deficiency – and all its attendant ailments and issues – is on the rise. That being the case, there has never been a more important time for people to learn how to care for their bodies, nor for the sharing of such valuable knowledge. While good nutrition is, in many ways, quite simple to understand and implement, it is heavily regulated by federal and state government; practicing nutritional consulting therefore needs to be done within certain guidelines and with respect to the laws of the land.

Within the United States – and the state of California, where I reside and work – a Nutritional Consultant (or Nutritionist) can assess signs of nutritional deficiency in a person and suggest or recommend foods, supplements, and/or lifestyle changes (such as exercise, dietary restraints, etc.). At the same time, even though a Nutritional Consultant may have a working knowledge of anatomy and physiology, it is against the law for that consultant to diagnose symptoms of a disease and to prescribe medications for such. This can be a fine line to walk, especially as clients come forward with their own diagnoses or reports from their doctors, etc. As a result, it becomes imperative to remember that:

- A Nutritional Consultant is not a doctor;
- A Nutritional Consultant cannot claim to cure anyone of anything;
- A Nutritional Consultant is concerned only with providing clients with proper nutritional information; and
- A Nutritional Consultant should never suggest a person leave the doctor presently treating him or her, or that a client should stop taking his or her medication.

By maintaining these strict, but necessary boundaries, a Nutritional Consultant can look forward to a fulfilling and active career in the “healing arts” field.

One of the ways that a Nutritional Consultant can be protected is by having a “Client Statement” form (similar to a disclaimer). This gives the client a visible and tangible reference that states clearly that the Nutritionist is not in the business of diagnosing or curing anything. Having a client sign and keep such a statement, and keeping a copy for office records, is a good way to matter-of-factly inform people of a Nutritional Consultant’s work and boundaries.

Another area of potential trouble for a Nutritional Consultant is in what is directly communicated through words. Since a Nutritional Consultant is not a doctor and cannot either diagnose or prescribe, it is unlawful for such a practitioner to name (or even guess) from which ailment a client is suffering. In truth, a good nutritionist will not even agree or disagree with the diagnosis of a medical doctor, for that can be construed as diagnosing, as well! As a result, a wise

Nutritional Consultant is one who keeps his or her comments very noncommittal and open-ended. Statements like, “Proper nutrition is very important to all of us; let’s discuss your diet” are good and safe statements to make, because they focus not on a particular ailment or diagnosis, but on the actual work that the Nutritional Consultant is trained to perform. One of the best things that a Nutritional Consultant can do when faced with a client who talks about ailments, treatment modalities and opinions is to simply steer the conversation toward nutritional aids that can help stimulate or enhance healing in certain parts of the body.

When asked about debilitating and life-threatening diseases, a Nutritional Consultant should be prepared to give honest, yet lawful, responses. Clients with such ailments want and need support and encouragement, and a well-trained Nutritional Consultant can offer both. Here’s my response to someone’s asking for help:

“My studies indicate that many diseases are tied to metabolic failures and/or nutritional deficiencies. In this day and age, we are exposed to toxins on almost every front – in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and even the food we eat. While it may seem impossible to avoid all of these problems entirely, I believe that even longstanding deficiencies can be ameliorated by making choices that improve the diet and lifestyle. While I can’t directly treat disease, I can certainly assist you in overcoming your nutritional difficulties and in restoring a nutritional balance that will optimize your body’s innate healing ability.”

A great way to help people who come to a session with preexisting conditions is to discuss detoxification. Since many physical symptoms and illnesses are related to toxicity of the body and its systems, recommending a safe and effective detoxification program can be very helpful to most people. Because it could be construed as an attempt to diagnose and prescribe a cure, speaking about detoxification should be done carefully. It is important to remind clients that the aim is not to cure, but to enhance the body’s health and healing ability through nutrition and proper food supplementation.

Knowing the “ins and outs” of the Nutritional Consultant profession is the only way to be sure that it is done correctly and legally. While there are many constraints on the practice, they are not wholly unwise; a poorly trained Nutritionist with a head for money and no heart for helping could do all sorts of damage. Therefore, it is important to remember that this is a profession based on helping people, on educating and assisting them as they learn how to take care of themselves and develop good health. With that in mind, it behooves every aspiring Nutritional Consultant to know the rules and regulations surrounding the practice of nutritional counseling. It is also a good idea for a person in this profession to stay abreast of the latest research and findings, and to know well the various health-promoting foods and food supplements that are available locally and through companies of good repute.