

Abstract Title:

Exploring Dietitians' Use of Expressive Touch in Patient Encounters

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Objectives: Effective communication skills are necessary for establishing successful Registered Dietitian (RD)-patient relationships. Expressive touch (ET) is a form of spontaneous, affective, non-verbal communication that has not been explored in the Dietetics literature. This study aims to explore clinical RDs' perceptions and use of ET in patient encounters.

Methods: Phase one of a two-phase mixed methods study was an online survey (Qualtrics©) with one open-ended and 12 Likert-scale questions emailed to a convenience sample of 249 clinical RDs practicing in Northern Ontario (January 2017). Quantitative data analysis included descriptive and association statistics using Excel© while free-text responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Research ethics approval was received from Lakehead University.

Results: The response rate was 54% (n=135); distribution by age, practice location, and work setting were consistent with the College of Dietitians of Ontario membership statistics. Years of practice ranged from 1 to 30 years; majority working with adults (94%) and in ambulatory settings (64%). Many perceived that ET may effectively communicate feelings (77%), increase patients' comfort (66%), and enhance therapeutic relationships (68%). Half of respondents (52%) reported being comfortable using ET, which was significant among RDs \geq 30 years of age. In practice, the majority (81%) did not commonly use ET, with the exception of those working with pediatric populations (85%). RD respondents reported the perceived benefits and risks, as well as the influence of several personal, professional, patient, and situational characteristics on their use of different forms of ET.

Conclusion: RDs perceive ET to be beneficial, yet this is not necessarily translated into practice. Factors influencing RDs' perceptions and actions require deeper exploration in Phase two (2017-2018).

Significance: As a form of non-verbal communication, ET has the potential to improve patient outcomes in nutritional care. Understanding RDs' perceptions and use of ET can inform dietetics training towards effective patient-centred practices.