

Abstract Title

You can't touch...or can you? Dietitians' perceptions of expressive touch in client encounters

C. Green ¹, V. Vandall-Walker ², L. Rysdale ³, K. Stojkovic ¹, M. Stevens ¹, H. Feldman ¹, S. Tymura ¹. ¹ Northern Ontario Dietetic Internship Program, Northern Ontario School of Medicine, ² Athabasca University, Athabasca, AB, ³ Northern Ontario Dietetic Internship Program, Northern Ontario School of Medicine, Sudbury, ON

Abstract

Introduction: Expressive touch (ET) is a non-procedural, affective, and non-verbal form of communication that can enhance the provision of client-centred care and improve outcomes in dietetics. Registered Dietitians' (RDs') perceptions and use of ET in client encounters are unknown.

Objectives: We explored RDs' characteristics and perspectives related to their use of ET in client encounters.

Methods: Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, Northern Ontario clinical RDs participated in a survey to provide quantitative data that was further explained through interviews with a subset of participants (n=17).

Results: Survey response rate was 54% (n=135); distribution by age, location, and work setting were consistent with Ontario clinical RD practice profiles. Survey results indicated that most RDs consider ET a useful communication tool in client encounters (66-77%), yet are hesitant to use ET (81%). Comfort with ET was reported among older and more experienced RDs and those working with long-term, ambulatory, or pediatric populations. Qualitative analysis revealed ET overall, to be Situationally Beneficial by communicating: empathic concern, kindness, teamwork, and gratitude. The interplay of factors influencing RD uptake were described as themes: client openness to touch, the environment, and RD comfort with touch. ET use was common among RDs with an affinity to touching, and with distressed clients of the same gender outside of their age group. Concerns regarding personal safety, misinterpretation, or unknown client customs limited use of ET.

Conclusion: Expressive touch is valued by many Northern Ontario clinical RDs to enhance care. Selective use of ET within the different contexts of dietetic practice is determined by perceived client and individual RD comfort.

Significance to the field of dietetics: These results can sensitize RDs to consider adopting ET into practice. Education, including exploration of personal limits, is needed to promote ET as another communication tool for the provision of effective client-centred care.