On 29 January 2010 at the Food Standards Agency in London, a simple signing ceremony marked a new era for the profession of nutrition and for the future of the professional nutritionist. It was the transfer of the UK Voluntary Register of Nutritionists (UKVRN) from the Nutrition Society (NS) to the newly established professional body, the Association for Nutrition (AfN). The transfer became effective on 1 March.

“The ambition of the Association for Nutrition is to protect the public through developing the profession of nutrition, within the context of acting as a modern day regulator,” explained Professor Alan Jackson, the Association’s inaugural President.

“The setting of standards, the processes required to enable appropriate and responsible regulation, the accreditation of courses and other training opportunities, and the recognition and development of CPD represents the Association’s core function.”

Alongside Professor Alan Jackson were Professor Ian MacDonald, Nutrition Society President, Dr David Bender, NS Publications Officer, Fred Wentworth-Bowyer, CEO of NS, Professor Martin Wiseman, AfN Honorary Treasurer and Richard Denyer, CEO of AfN. Speaking on behalf of the new professional body, Alan Jackson thanked the Nutrition Society for their role in securing a professional standard with the register to date.

Anne De Looy, AfN Hon Secretary, summed up the mood waiting for the transfer of the register: “Like any baby, the birth of the Association of Nutrition required waiting, apprehension, excitement and a little pain. It is some five years since Jackie Landman, then Registrar at the Nutrition Society, asked me to support the development of a schema for continuing professional development for nutritionists,” said Professor De Looy. “The timing was perfect as it anticipated the need for a strong and reliable voice for nutrition in the face of popular media figures who did not have the credentials to offer reliable information or advice. As always, though, the problem was how to distinguish evidence based professionals from others, and allow them to become highly credible ‘voices for nutrition’. Now is the time .... AfN takes forward the vision to form a nutrition profession to protect the interests of the public.”
Since the official signing, over 95% of nutritionists registered on the UKVRN have authorised transfer of their registration details, representing an unprecedented transfer success rate and signifying strong support to fulfil the ambition to protect the public through the registration of those working in nutrition.

Richard Denyer, Chief Executive of AfN says the primary purpose of the Association is “to ensure the safety and competence to practise of those professing nutrition in order to protect the public from the unqualified and the unsafe.”

He explains: “The public rely on professional bodies for unbiased information, an ethical approach and leadership that is willing to stand up and be counted. Trust, respect and professional accountability are intrinsic requirements for both democracy and markets to function properly. In food, health and social care sectors, practitioners, employers and commentators have been crying out for an organisation dedicated to promoting, enforcing and recognising high standards.”

**Listening to Registrants**

Last year nutritionists were asked what their priorities were from a new independent body. Those already on the register knew some of the benefits associated with delivering to the public a safe and consistently high standard of nutrition advice which is evidence-based. On top of this, nutritionists communicated their support for a body that would actively provide:

- A greater understanding of the role of a nutritionist;
- Recognition of the significance of the registered nutritionist professional designation;
- Improvement of understanding of the role of nutrition among other health professionals;
- Clearer distinction between a state registered dietitian and a nutritionist;
- A framework for continuing professional development; and
- Opportunities to share ideas on trends, changing requirements and good practice,

These aspirations are being addressed through a variety of initiatives aimed at engaging the public, other health professionals, the media and the registrant, which will include; an interactive website, group discussions and forums, and support groups for studying nutritionists.
Alison Douglas, AfN Registration Officer, believes that the next 12 months will be an exciting time for registrants, “I am looking forward to seeing the numbers of those keen to join colleagues already on the register increase as the importance of the UKVRN and AfN grows”

As part of her role, Alison will support nutritionists through streamlined application processes. She recognises that acceptance onto the register gives individuals a sense of unity, support, shared responsibility, and collective ownership towards the future of nutrition. This in turn helps to present the profession as an important, vibrant and growing one, ready to meet the increasing public interest in, and demand for, better food, nutrition and overall health.

**Government investment in nutrition advice**

In addition to maintaining the register, AfN will also work to foster an effective nutrition workforce, in collaboration with other key stakeholders. Work is already underway to tackle the thorny issue of advice given by those that work on the front-line with the most disadvantaged sectors of society. *The Nutritional Wellbeing of the British Population*, published in 2008 by the UK Government’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition highlighted the considerable prevalence of nutritional deficiencies especially amongst vulnerable, despite considerable public expenditure over the past decade and more. One of the report’s conclusions was that the population is at risk from inadequately trained front-line staff.

“AfN is fortunate to hit the ground running. We have already competed successfully for a government grant under the DH Third Sector Investment Programme (TSIP), in which we are scoping the training, educational and support needs for those groups directly and indirectly involved in the delivery of nutritional advice within the health and social care sectors,” said Professor Jackson.

The three-year project aims to establish mechanisms through which members of the health and social care workforce at all levels of skill, can become demonstrably more competent in nutrition. This will help to ensure the advice they provide to the public is safe, evidence-based and effective. The ultimate objective will be to enable such workers to make a significant contribution to addressing nutrition-related inequalities, while making it possible to establish a clear, quality assurance framework in nutrition. The focus of this project is on those with lower levels of nutritional knowledge and skill than is possessed by those on the UKVRN.
So does this benefit existing Registrants? Not only is the project mapping and providing information on vocational training and education, open learning and on-the-job training innutrition in terms of comparability, validity and fitness for purpose, but it will also:

- propose bench-marks of proficiency and training and practice;
- identify what is needed in the development of professional support and mentoring around nutrition; and
- suggest how these requirements can be optimised and delivered efficiently, including ladders of opportunity right up to the levels demanded of registered professionals, who can be expected to occupy more significant leadership roles.

“The first big challenge is how to distinguish between those who possess sufficient knowledge, skill and judgement, and those who do not,” explains Stefanie Radford, Project Officer with AfN. “This project aims to provide the answers to the limits of capability of front line staff, especially those who interact with disadvantaged and deprived communities where the greatest risk of ill health lies. It will also make them aware of the nature of the competences possessed by Registered Nutritionists, and how guidance can be obtained from such professionals when needed.”

Thus, nutrition professionals can be reassured that the high standards and reputation associated with the UKVRN will be maintained and reinforced through project delivery such as this one funded by the Department of Health.

AfN would like nutritionists to provide suggestions and advice throughout the project. Offers of participation (including access to job descriptions, in-house training schedules and other relevant material) will be welcome at any time. Contact Stefanie Radford, s.radford@associationfornutrition.org

Engaging with Registrants and other opinion-formers

“Perceptions of nutrition will only change with the full-hearted support of registered nutritionists.” advocates Kathy Lewis, Member of AfN Council and Chair of Communication Committee. “Remaining as the standard-setter is no longer sufficient in an environment where interest and demand for nutrition is so high. Our role in changing perceptions is crucial. Not
only is AfN well placed to engage with stakeholders to drive through change, but it will also provide the much needed leadership, vision and dynamism to effect such change. Registered Nutritionists will very much be part of this process.”

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