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Perspective

Nutrition Education in Residency Programs for Integrated Patient Care

Jane Bouchard*

Department of Psychiatry, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

DESCRIPTION

Mental health care has witnessed remarkable growth in recent decades, with increasing awareness of the biological, psychological and social determinants of psychiatric disorders. However, one key factor remains underrepresented in psychiatric education: nutrition. Despite extensive evidence demonstrating the relationship between diet, metabolic health and mental well-being, most psychiatry residency programs provide minimal structured training in nutritional science or dietary interventions. This gap raises concern, given that psychiatrists are often positioned to address lifestyle issues that directly influence the course and treatment outcomes of psychiatric illnesses. Addressing this omission requires a rethinking of residency curricula to ensure nutrition is integrated as an essential element of psychiatric training.

Nutrition and mental health

Research over the past two decades has emphasized the close relationship between dietary patterns and psychiatric outcomes. Diets high in refined carbohydrates, saturated fats and ultra-processed foods have been associated with elevated risks of depression, anxiety and cognitive decline. Conversely, diets rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and omega-3 fatty acids support improved mood, enhanced cognitive performance and reduced risk of neurodegenerative disorders.

Nutritional psychiatry, an emerging field, highlights the importance of diet in preventing and managing mental illnesses. It also draws attention to how nutritional deficiencies, such as inadequate intake of vitamin D, B vitamins, iron, or zinc, can exacerbate psychiatric symptoms. In addition, the gut-brain axis, which reflects the bi-directional communication between intestinal microbiota and the central nervous system, further reinforces the need for psychiatrists to be knowledgeable about the impact of food on mental health.

Despite this growing body of evidence, training in nutrition is largely absent from psychiatry residency programs worldwide. This educational gap prevents future psychiatrists from providing comprehensive care that incorporates diet as a modifiable factor influencing psychiatric well-being.

Psychiatry residency training

Medical education in general has historically placed limited emphasis on nutrition. Several surveys reveal that medical students receive fewer than 20 hours of structured nutrition education throughout their training, often concentrated during preclinical years. This exposure is inadequate for developing the competence required to translate dietary science into clinical practice.

Within psychiatry residency programs, the situation is even more concerning. Training tends to prioritize psychopharmacology, psychotherapy and inpatient management while lifestyle medicine including diet and exercise is rarely emphasized. Residents may graduate with expertise in prescribing complex psychiatric medications but without the ability to counsel patients on diet-related risk factors that often interact with pharmacologic treatment.

For example, antipsychotic medications are strongly associated with weight gain, insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome. Residents learn to prescribe and monitor these medications but often lack structured training in dietary strategies that could mitigate associated health risks. This omission undermines holistic care and contributes to the rising prevalence of cardiometabolic comorbidities in psychiatric populations.

Barriers to implementation

Several obstacles may challenge the integration of nutrition into psychiatry residency curricula such as residency programs are already densely packed with mandatory requirements, leaving

Correspondence to: Jane Bouchard, Department of Psychiatry, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, E-mail: janebouchard@mcgillu.ca

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little room for additional content, few psychiatry departments have faculty with expertise in nutritional psychiatry, limiting available mentors, lifestyle medicine is often undervalued compared to psychopharmacology, despite its relevance to long-term outcomes, dmaller programs may lack funding to develop new curricula or hire nutrition specialists. Acknowledging these barriers is important for developing realistic solutions.

Opportunities for Advancement

Despite the barriers, there are multiple opportunities to strengthen nutrition education collaboration with Nutrition Departments, medical schools with nutrition or public health faculties can provide teaching resources, nutrition concepts can be embedded within existing lectures on psychopharmacology, preventive psychiatry, or psychosomatic medicine, digital modules and webinars allow residents to access content flexibly, residency accrediting bodies can encourage or require the inclusion of nutrition competencies, driving systemic change, psychiatric associations can support the development of nutrition education initiatives, conferences and continuing medical education courses.

Nutrition has long been an overlooked component of psychiatric education. As mental health care continues to evolve, the importance of addressing diet as part of comprehensive treatment cannot be ignored. Psychiatry residency programs must rise to the challenge of incorporating structured nutrition education, equipping residents with the ability to assess, counsel and collaborate in this area.

The call to action is clear residency curricula must adapt to include nutrition, not as an optional topic but as an integral part of psychiatric training. Doing so will empower future psychiatrists to provide more effective, holistic and patient-centered care, ultimately advancing the mission of psychiatry to promote mental health in its fullest sense.