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Future Trends and the Pace of Change: Are We Ready?

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an undeniable case for change. Life, work and organizations will never be “back to normal.” This opens up massive opportunities to raise our awareness of future trends and to elevate our profession, build resilience, increase our influence and visibility, and infuse futuristic competencies into our educational programs and practices.

The pace of change and innovation is accelerating as customer needs and wants evolve, decentralization of health care becomes mainstream, and expectations grow for technological advances, genomics, and artificial intelligence. There is an increased focus on food systems, population health, and equitable access, as well as the role of food as medicine in wellness, disease prevention, and disease management.

Change also allows us, as individual business entities, to expand our influence and leadership into fields beyond nutrition and dietetics. For us to create the change we desire, we must be strategically focused and not reactive.

The Academy's Board of Directors regularly reviews emerging trends and important forces or change drivers impacting the profession. To incorporate them into our work, the Board, the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics, the Commission on Dietetic Registration, the Council on Future Practice, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and the Academy's Headquarters Team have been revising and refreshing the Academy's Strategic Plan.

This month, I would like to share my view of some large-scale future trends that could influence health care and consumers over the next several years. My perspectives are based on attending the virtual 2020 Oliver Wyman Health Innovation Summit last October, entitled “Future Truths, Inevitable and Inspiring.”¹ Additional insights have come from Academy Board of Directors strategic planning discussions and educational opportunities provided by the Council on Future Practice and other nutrition and dietetics professionals.

“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday's logic.”

—Peter Drucker

PERSONALIZED HEALTH CARE

In the years to come, one-size-fits-all may no longer be the preferred model of health care; personalized medicine could be the standard. Personalized medicine would be driven not by information on the average person but by more and better personalized data, as well as better analytics and insights from multiple data sources, devices, and wearables.

Continued advances in genetics and genomics will impact how health care moves forward, possibly including how insurance company actuaries price their product offerings.

I believe health care is becoming decentralized and shifting away from facility-based care. Patient care will be shifting from physician offices and hospitals to home hubs and new digital access points, such as medical clinics attached to big box and grocery stores or pharmacy chains. Specialty hospital care will be on the rise as patients are connected to specific care and resources designed for their individual diagnoses.

Consumers may expect to control their own health care information and expect their health care providers to share that information to receive higher-quality, coordinated care that is personalized to their needs.

New digital partners and tools could be created to help facilitate this patient access process, including a shift from just collecting the data to creating unique and personalized insights.

Next month, I will focus on how these future trends could influence our day-to-day practice. My hope is that a discussion of these trends will spark your personal fire of innovation and resilience and allow your future practice and our organization alike to grow and flourish.

As you read the scenarios and predictions in the boxes, please consider:

- Are there different roles we want to play?
- Are we recognizing gaps that we can fill?
- Are we creating new innovations and opportunities?
- How will these trends shape the way we do business and advise patients, clients, and consumers?
- How could these trends help us increase our relevance to members and consumers?

CONSUMER MOVEMENT TOWARD CHOICE

Insights from the Oliver Wyman *Future Truths Health Innovation Journal*, vol. 4,² indicate that consumers are now choosing providers based on how they value their interactive experience and personalized services, ease of use and access, and price rather than on their limited knowledge of quality. A large number of consumers prefer virtual or home-based care and want to schedule and be seen at a location and time of their convenience. They expect limited waiting times and to access content when and where they want it.

CLIMATE CHANGE

According to Angie Tagtow, MS, RD, LD, founder and chief strategist at Äkta Strategies LLC: “Climate change is no longer an anticipated phenomenon; changes in climate across the globe are happening now. Rising global air and water temperatures, erratic weather patterns, drought, fires, and floods disrupt food systems, making it difficult to ensure a safe, accessible, and nutritious food supply. However, the relationship between climate, food and water supplies, and nutrition is not unilateral, it is bidirectional. Climate impacts our ability to produce a safe, accessible, and nutritious food supply, and what we choose to eat and our dietary patterns either lessens or intensifies the rate of climate change.

“Dietitians must apply a systems lens to this wicked problem. We must recognize the extensive interconnectedness between climate, agriculture (crops, livestock, fisheries, agroforestry), and food and nutrition. Understanding this nexus allows us to be responsive and design more effective individual and community interventions. Dietitians can forge relationships across sectors, including government, and collaborate on robust multidimensional approaches—specifically policy, system, and environmental strategies—that are “nutrition-sensitive and climate-smart.”

“Dietitians play a critical role in the climate, food system, and nutrition conversation. This is the time for dietitians to lead to ensure secure, sustainable, resilient, and healthy food and water systems for all, now and in the future.”⁴

- What competencies and scope of practice changes will be necessary for us to lead the way and remain ahead of our competition?
- What relationships can we build and leverage to expand our interventions and influence?

It has been said many times—and it remains true—that the Academy is *all* of us, yet it also is bigger than any *one* of us and it will outlast all of us. We have a duty to make our profession and the Academy stronger for generations to come. Our decisions today and our plans for the future must be strategic, innovative, and insightful.

My challenge to you is...Are you willing to:

- Do things differently, starting now?
- Invest in capabilities that make us unique?

POPULATION HEALTH

The fields of community nutrition, wellness, coaching, and public and population health are wide open for our influence and leadership. Currently there is a void of credentialed practitioners who are recognized by the public as the experts in this space. Many nonqualified individuals with minimal education and training are filling this gap, with the potential to cause harm. This is an opportunity for Academy members at every level of training and expertise, including those noncredentialed graduates trained under Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics—accredited programs, to join together and be on the offense to create certifications and credentials that position us to take our place to benefit the public.

FOOD SYSTEMS

I asked David C. Donnan, MBA, PEng, partner emeritus with A.T. Kearney, a global management consulting firm, adjunct associate professor at Northwestern University, and a Public Member of our Board, for his views on trends involving food systems.

“In 2020,” he says, “the pandemic triggered major disruptions to our food system, from the shutdown of the foodservice and restaurant industries to supply chain interruptions and product shortages. But the pandemic also accelerated several food trends that were already underway. We saw a sudden pivot to online shopping, a renewed focus on well-being, and an increased demand for product transparency. The pandemic and our adjustment to home cooking also made us more aware of connections between food and health. We can expect to see continued growth in plant-based foods, alternative meats and dairy, and an increased awareness of balanced diets.

“While the pandemic has disrupted the world, RDNs can help consumers during these stressful times with healthy food choices and assist them to make informed decisions about the foods they eat.”

- Decrease complexity and make it easier for our clients to make the right choice?
- Move from reactive to proactive?
- Reimagine how we can do what we do better?
- Build the depth and breadth of our membership by welcoming and incorporating influential partners and all graduates trained under Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics–accredited programs?

As a profession, we must look beyond our education and our traditional roles to build new competencies that position us as the leaders and innovators of tomorrow's health, environmental, and social systems.

The sky is the limit for our profession.

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