Knowledge and practice among dietitians in four Western European countries regarding malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia

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Rationale:
Adequate distinction between malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia is important in clinical care. Despite the overlap in physical characteristics, differences in etiology have therapeutical and prognostic implications.

Aim:
To determine whether dietitians in selected European countries have ‘proper knowledge’ of malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia, and use terminology accordingly.

Methods:
• Anonymous online survey among dietitians in the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Norway
• ‘Proper knowledge’ defined as describing 2 or 3 of the common domains of malnutrition plus a correct answer to 3 case studies regarding starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia
• Chi-squared test was used to analyse differences in experience, working place and number of malnourished patients treated between dietitians with ‘proper’ vs. ‘less proper knowledge’

Results:
• 7186 invited in the study, 712 participated, 369 completed all mandatory questions (5%)
• ‘Malnutrition’ is used as term in clinical practice by 88% of the respondents, starvation 3%, cachexia 30% and sarcopenia 12%
• Case studies on starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia were correctly answered by respectively 58%, 43% and 74%
• ‘Proper knowledge’ was present in 13% of the respondents.
• The percentage with ‘proper knowledge’ was higher in respondents working in a hospital or in municipality (16%, P<0.041) than in those working in other settings (7%)

Conclusion:
• Given the low percentage of dietitians qualified with ‘proper knowledge’ of malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia, origins of muscle wasting are suboptimally recognized in clinical practice.
• Identifying cases is performed better than the theoretical understanding of the concept of malnutrition.

Figure 1. Results of questions on knowledge
*Defined as mentioning 2 or 3 domains of the definition of malnutrition and correct answers to all cases.