

family health nutritionist



Nutritionist Checkpoint

Do you understand the physiology of the human body?

Are you well versed in nutritional science?

Would you enjoy working in the community, doing one-on-one consulting and providing lectures and education to children and adults in many venues?

If so, read on

A TRUE TALE

When she was an undergraduate, Karen Pearson, MS, left her home state of South Dakota to spend a summer in Alaska. She fell in love with the state



Karen E. Pearson, MS

and vowed to return one day, “but life intervened, as it always does,” she says. After graduating from college with a degree in home economics education, Karen Pearson joined the Peace Corps. She was sent to Jamaica to work in their version of the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), which taught farmers’ wives the skills they needed to preserve foods and prepare nutritious meals to enhance the quality of their families’ lives. The perspective she gained from this experience had a profound effect, one that changed her career path. “Once I started working in the countryside, it was clear to

me the local people needed more than just food planning skills. They also needed basic health and sanitation education, and other basic skills to ensure health,” Pearson says.

After her Peace Corps experience, Pearson decided to continue her education and develop a public health focus. After receiving her master’s degree in nutrition, Pearson took a job as a nutritionist with the South Dakota Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which provides vouchers for nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating and referrals to health care for low-income women, infants and children. Within a year, she was named Director of the WIC Supplemental Food and Nutrition Education Program for the South Dakota Department of Health.

Eighteen years later, Pearson was still in South Dakota, working as the health director for a county health department, when she received a call about an opening in Alaska for the state nutrition director position. “I knew I would go back to Alaska one day,” she says. “It took a while, but I finally fulfilled my promise to myself.”

As Alaska’s state nutritionist, Pearson duplicated much of the important work she had begun in South Dakota. Several years later, Pearson was promoted to section chief for Maternal, Child and Family Health (MCFH) in

the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. She was subsequently appointed Deputy Director for the state's Division of Public Health. In February 2001, Pearson became the Alaska Department of Health's Director of the Division of Public Health in the Department of Health and Social Services. "I think it's great to be able to show nutritionists that they, too, can move up through the system," she says.

"With diverse public health professionals collaborating to enhance a community's health, the nutritionist has a key place at the table."

Profiling the job

Nutrition is public health. The foods individuals consume have a major impact on their health and well-being. Diet and attendant social customs influence the health of communities as well, whether one of pregnant women of a particular ethnic group, or everyone living in a given community. "With diverse public health professionals collaborating to enhance a community's health, the nutritionist has a key place at the table," says Pearson.

The usual image of the nutritionist has been the hospital practitioner, who plans meals and ensures that patients receive their special diets. They comprise only a small segment of the field, says Pearson. Public health nutritionists have the opportunity to work with a wide range of populations, including children with special needs, people suffering from chronic diseases, and the elderly. A nutritionist can educate communities about nutrition, conduct one-on-one counseling or set nutrition policy at the local, state and federal government levels. Universities and private laboratories have an ongoing need for nutritionists as researchers and professors.

Nutrition is an excellent profession for someone who enjoys interacting with people, connects easily with others and believes that sharing knowledge will make a difference. The required skills include an understanding of the sciences of nutrition — digestion, nutritional balance and vitamin needs, among others — and physiology. Psychology, with a focus on how to change behavior and motivate people, is also an important science to the nutritionist.

A registered dietitian (RD) degree is needed to execute therapeutic interventions and to counsel in hospitals and other medical settings. Some dietitians who have large practices in diabetes treatment also become trained and



Did you know?
WIC serves approximately 45 percent of all infants born in the United States and young children under five years of age.¹



Did you know?
With nearly 70,000 members, the American Dietetic Association is the nation's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals.²

certified as diabetes educators. For most community health positions, a master's degree in public health with an undergraduate degree in nutrition is suggested. If nutritional research is your calling, even more scientific background is required. And if your interest is at the policy level, core public health courses are essential.

At the federal level, nutritionists work at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to direct programs and research with a nutritional component. They also evaluate grants given to states to examine the treatment of such issues as obesity and physical fitness, and observe the implementation of the nutritional components of these programs. Within the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), nutritionists act as regional consultants to the states, helping to integrate nutrition into programs and to provide technical expertise where needed.

Community nutrition is an important practice area. Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is an excellent example of a nationwide community nutrition program that employs a huge number of nutritionists to counsel individuals, run programs and set policies geared to populations with special dietary needs. WIC services are available to pregnant women, breastfeeding women and children up to the age of five. Participants in the program must meet specific income requirements, based usually on state poverty levels, and have a nutritional risk. For those who qualify, WIC provides special food vouchers for nutrition-rich foods and infant formula.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services develops many programs and has many partnerships directed towards nutrition enhancement. For example, nutrition professionals work with the food stamp program, which entails providing clients with information about making better food choices. Their goal is to make food stamp dollars go further in supplying meals that are more nutritious to recipients.

Nutrition professionals often partner with the department of education to reach children. "There is a very high anemia rate among children in a particular area of Alaska. WIC provides food and nutrition education for children up to five years of age," Pearson says. "After age five, the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) share the task, and work through the schools to

continue supplementing the children’s iron intake and educating families, with WIC in a background advisory capacity for the care of the older children.”

Obesity in both children and adults, another problem in this country, is a burgeoning area of practice for the public health nutritionist. The public health nutritionist plays a central role in reversing this unhealthy trend,



which leads to many associated disorders, from heart and cardiovascular disease to depression. Through WIC and related programs, and by contributing to changing policy that determines the content of school meals, nutritionists can substantially improve the health of the American populace.

“Education and habit-changing are key techniques for the nutritionist. Changing eating behaviors that lead to obesity, such as by acclimating children’s tastes to nutritious and low-fat foods when they are very young, is an important strategy in fighting obesity among all Americans, young and old,” says

Pearson. “After all, children become adults, and carry the habits of childhood into later life, when it is far more difficult to reverse course.”

A day in the life

Karen Pearson’s title — she is Director of the Division of Public Health in Alaska’s health and social services department — does not suggest she is exclusively concerned with nutrition. That her particular background leads to a special understanding of the impact of nutrition on health for individuals, families and communities cannot be denied, however.

“Those in the nutrition field can work at everything from actually being out in the community doing nutrition education and one-on-one counseling to being in a position to establish nutrition policy at the government level,” she says. “In all cases, you have a tremendous opportunity to effect lasting change in people’s lifestyles and health.”

Pearson’s responsibilities cover nutrition in the broader context of public health. “Right now we’re in the middle of Alaska’s legislative sessions, so much of my time goes toward making sure we provide the information



“What and how much people eat have a major impact on their health and well-being, both individually and population-wide, whether the population is one of pregnant women, a particular ethnic group or everyone living in a given community.”

Karen Pearson,
MS

lawmakers need to support our budget requests and any bills under consideration,” she says. Among the bills currently on the table are those relating to funding for nutrition-based programs; others involve teenage smoking, teenage sexual activity, family violence and bioterrorism. “I spend a good deal of time working with other health care organizations and government agencies at both the public health and acute care ends of the system,” she says. “A big part of my job is making sure that we’re working together at every level to the best of our ability.”



In contrast, one of Pearson’s staff nutritionists is likely to have more of an on-the-ground presence in local communities. A case in point: the director of a small WIC clinic in rural Alaska “might start her day on the telephone, referring WIC clients to public health nurses and calling to see if previous referrals were followed up,” says Pearson.

But most of the nutritionist’s work is live and in-person. “When her phone work is out of the way, she may have several appointments to screen new clients or conduct WIC eligibility recertifications,” Pearson says. “At noon, she teaches a class to WIC recipients in healthy cooking methods and the nutrient values of different foods. Perhaps in this class she demonstrates how to cook dried peas and beans and explains their nutritional value.”

In the afternoon, the nutritionist visits a high school cafeteria to talk with teenagers about eating disorders. In the evening, she addresses a local community group about obesity and weight loss. “I can tell you from direct experience that a community-based nutritionist’s days are long and demanding, but incredibly rewarding,” Pearson says. “The day-to-day rigors are more than offset by knowing that you’re helping individuals and families change their views of eating and nutrition, and helping them form the foundation of a healthier and, ideally, longer life.”

career at a glance



Karen E. Pearson, MS

- 2001–Present **Director** Division of Public Health, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (State Health Official)
- 1997–2001 **Deputy Director** Division of Public Health, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
- 1990–1997 **Section Chief** Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Maternal, Child and Family Health
- 1988–1990 **Chief, Nutrition Services/Health Program Specialist III** Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Maternal, Child and Family Health
- 1987–1988 **Division Director** Pennington County; Division of Public Health and Human Services
- 1985–1987 **Director, Clinic Services/Special Projects** South Dakota Department of Health; Division of Health Services
- 1981–1985 **Director, Nutrition Services Program** South Dakota Department of Health; Division of Health Services
- 1977–1979 **Graduate Administrative Assistant/International Agriculture** South Dakota State University/ACTION
- 1975–1977 **School Food Service Special Project Director** Child and Adult Nutrition Services/South Dakota Department of Education and Cultural Affairs
- 1975 **Quality Control Specialist** South Dakota Department of Social Services
- 1974 **Home Economics Component Training Staff Member** University of the West Indies
- 1972–1974 **Peace Corps Volunteer** Peace Corps

1 <http://www.breastfeeding.org/newsletter/v2i1/page5.html>

2 <http://www.eatright.org/factsheet.html>