

The Essential Components of Comprehensive Nutrition and Dietetic Portals

Zahra Sadat Abtahi ^{1*}, Reza Safdari ², Majan Ghazi Saeedi ³, Ahmad Reza Dorosty ⁴

¹ School of Allied Medical Sciences, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran ² Department of Health Information Management, School of Allied Medical Sciences, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran ³ Department of Health Information Management, School of Allied Medical Sciences, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran ⁴ Department of Nutrition, School of Nutritional Sciences and Dietetics, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Education and information delivery is an integral part of an effective strategy to control the prevalence of obesity and diabetes. Nutrition and dietetic portals provide integrated access to a wide range of information resources for nutritionists, physicians and the public due. The nutrition and dietetic portals in selected countries was reviewed to gain insight into the essential elements of such portals. The nutrition and dietetic portals were found to be common in presenting annual statistics, nutrition news, and calendar of events, providing information on job opportunities, different diets, strategies and policies, professional standards and rules, providing access to nutrition guidelines and manuals, and introducing educational and research facilities. The data on types of information and services provided by the nutrition and dietetic portals can be used in developing novel portals of the kind in other countries.

Keywords: Nutrition, Diet, Portal, Health Information Technology

Background and Objectives

Food and nutrition are among the most essential human needs from the first moment to the last moment of life [1]. Food provides energy and countless materials required for the construction, growth and survival of the human body [2]. The nutritional habits of every nation indicate the international economic and political values of that nation [3]. The development of modern biological sciences and technologies revealed that the growth and development as well as scrutiny and mind dynamism of the human body are closely related to the type and quality of diet. The nutritional habit has a great impact on health and diseases in some periods of evolution and growth. Accordingly, the lack of a balanced and varied diet will cause some irreparable side effects. Thus, one of the most important concerns of learned scholars and sympathetic policymakers is to

promote the culture of appropriate and balanced nutrition throughout the world [2]. It is vital to find additional ways to reduce overweight due to increased rate of obesity and obesity-related health problems. According to Saperstein *et al.*, the number of people who use the Internet to find information about diet, physical activity and weight loss is increasing.

The online applications help participants to give priority to their diets to reduce their weights. Such applications will also assist the users to change their physical activities and to apply behavioral and cognitive strategies for individual supervision and feedback from their diets. In addition, the online applications increase media literacy of the public [4]. Accordingly, one of the best solutions to solve this problem is to use web portal technology. In Information Technology (IT), the term "portal" refers to a website in the Internet or intranet as a gateway to access other websites [5].

The obstacles resulting from time constraints can be eliminated through establishing a portal to provide access to a comprehensive suite of electronic resources and services related to a specific field. Consequently, the search process of the technical resources is ac-

*Corresponding author: Zahra Sadat Abtahi, School of Allied Medical Sciences, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran, Tel: +98 9126237803, Email: HYPERLINK "mailto:zahra_abtahi65@yahoo.com" zahra_abtahi65@yahoo.com

celerated, and therefore, the search time is reduced. On the other hand, the portals are informational contexts to provide the required applications or software for e-business on the web. Furthermore, the portals integrate scattered information of databases or websites, regardless of the location and format through dynamic links [6].

With the development of health portals as the most important technical infrastructure for e-health in various countries, the specialized health portals including nutrition and dietetic portals were also established. Nutrition and dietetic portals will enhance the nutrition literacy and knowledge of the public and nutritionists through dynamic content and integrated access to resources, software, applications, databases, content customization, personalization, navigation and interactive or collaborative services [7].

Therefore, the attempts to establish and operate the nutrition portal in Iran aim at developing informatics activities [9]. In this regard, taking advantage of the experiences on the operation of international nutrition and dietetic portals is necessary for benchmarking their characteristics. Accordingly, the present study reviews the content and structural characteristics of the nutrition portals in selected countries. Finally, several suggestions are presented in this regard.

This cross-sectional descriptive-comparative study was conducted in 2014. In the first stage, the minimum content features of the nutrition and dietetic portals were identified through systematic study of the literature and parameters in previous studies on nutrition and diet. The extracted features were included in a checklist containing 9 sections and 42 parameters. The content validity of the checklist was approved by the professors. The sample consisted of American, Canadian and Australian nutrition and dietetic portals. Then the predetermined parameters were studied through observation and completion of the checklist. In case the portal content or some parameters were not available for security reasons, the researcher sent the checklist to the portal's officials to receive the required information. In the second stage, the HTML-based Iranian Nutrition and Dietetic Portal was designed and developed through semi-experimental study (www.hbisa.org/nutrition). Finally, several strategies were suggested to develop a national nutrition and dietetic portal in Iran.

Review

The results showed that the national nutrition and dietetic portals have been established and developed in the USA, Canada and Australia. Tables 1 and 2 show

the comparative analysis of the content features of the nutrition and dietetic portals.

USA

The results showed that the U.S. health care system is a combination of public and private sectors [8]. The first department related to the agriculture and nutrition was the US Department of Agriculture "USDA". In 1862, the late President Abraham Lincoln approved a bill concerning the establishment of USDA. This department was created to become a state scientific organization [9].

American Dietetic Portal is affiliated to the American Dietetic Association (ADA) as the world's largest organization of food and nutrition science. ADA is committed to improve public health and nutrition profession through education, research and support. The Association Board of Directors includes national leaders in the field of food, nutrition and health. ADA aims at optimizing the public health through food and nutrition. The mission of ADA is to empower the members to create a national system of food and nutrition [10].

Another active portal in the USA is the American Society for Nutrition (ASN). ASN is a non-profit organization, which brings together the top researchers as well as clinical and industrial nutritionists to contribute to the advancement of the knowledge of human and animal nutrition. Currently, the Association focuses on the clinical research. The mission of ASN is to develop the knowledge of nutrition through basic, clinical and multidisciplinary research, facilitating communication between doctors and nutritionists and those interested in the related areas, supporting the development and application of nutrition science to improve the clinical and general health throughout the world, promoting the medical education in nutrition, and providing reliable nutritional information to those who need such information [11].

Another portal studied in the USA is ADA, a non-profit organization, which is exempt from tax. The mission of ADA is to promote the optimal health through nutrition and health education. ADA is a scientific association to provide professionals and the public with information on the benefits of proper nutrition and health [12].

The results suggest that the American nutrition and dietetic portals contain general information such as news and events related to nutrition and diet, job opportunities for dietitians and students, calendar of events, annual statistics, information on healthy weight, weight loss and weight gain. These portals

also provide diets for infants and toddlers, children and adolescents, nutrition in school, women's nutrition during pregnancy, lactation, bone and heart health, nutrition during menopause, men's nutrition for active life, elderly nutrition, nutrition in different seasons and different cultures, different food resources in Chinese and Spanish cultures, vegetarian diet, and electronic newsletters.

The technical content of the portals include information on policies, nutrition support services, and professional standards and rules. The American portals uniquely provide remote health services as well. The audiences of the portals are nutritionists and the public. The educational content of the portals include online conferences, annual scientific meetings, remote education, and specialized forums on nutrition and diet. The portals provide access to books, newspapers, magazines, video library and E-book shopping [10,11,12].

Canada

According to the results, the major part of healthcare services is provided for free by the public health care system. In addition, some services are provided by the private sector [13]. The council for development of diet standards was established in 1938 to develop the required standards. It considers food standards and the essential nutrients to meet the needs of all healthy individuals [14].

One of the main nutrition and dietetic portals in Canada is Dietitians of Canada (DC). This is a professional association for nutritionists. DC aims at improving health through food and nutrition. Its mission is to support ethics and the best evidence-based diet, and increase the health in a unique manner using the knowledge of food and nutrition, supporting members in their varied and rewarding roles as the leaders promoting health, lifelong education as well as training dietetic-related careers in Canada [15].

Among the active portals in Canada is Canadian Nutrition Society (CNS) established by merging the Canadian Association of Clinical Nutrition and Canadian Association of Nutrition Sciences. The mission of CNS is to raise nutrition knowledge and training, support the use of best practices and policies to promote health, and prevent and treat diseases. CNS integrates the nutrition-related disciplines and professions. The Society has identified the key objectives and sub-objectives in one field: to help nutritionists and scientists, as well as feed industry, state, community and trainees [16].

The portals provide both public and secure access

platforms. The public platform provides access to the nutrition news, resources and job opportunities for dietitians, calendar of events, and basic tips for health promotion in different age groups and diseases, nutrition of infants, children and adolescents, nutrition in school, women's nutrition during pregnancy, sports nutrition, vegetarian diet, and general nutritional information. The secure platform provides access to policies and food regulations, basic tools to support the work, self-assessment tools of nutritional status, as well as professional standards and rules. Features such as nutrition in indigenous areas, remote health services, nutrition services for the elderly at home, nutrition and dietary services at long-term care centers and hospitals, labeling nutritional information and food fortification are unique features of the Canadian portal. The Canadian portal further includes educational modules such as the national conferences, annual scientific meetings, online training, and specialized nutrition and dietetic forums. The portal also provides online book and poster ordering, access to nutritional publications and magazines, as well as research conducted in the field of nutrition [15, 16].

Australia

The results show that medical care services in Australia are provided by both public and private sectors. The Ministry of Health is the supreme institution monitoring and adopting health policies [17]. Interest in forming a scientific society for nutrition professionals in Australia began to grow in early 1971. The first step was taken by a small group of specialists at a meeting in Melbourne in March, 1974, leading to the formation of Nutrition Society of Australia (NSA) [18].

The Australian Nutrition Portal is a non-governmental, non-profit organization with several offices throughout Australia. NSA is an independent organization to promote the health and welfare of all Australians. The mission of the Society is to promote the health of all Australians through encouraging food variety and physical activities. NSA is managed by a national board, which is responsible for taking strategic decisions and nutrition policies in Australia. The purposes of the Society (as a credible source of scientific information on key issues of nutrition) include the production and distribution of food among policymakers, media, trainers, consultants in government offices, the food industry and consumer groups on topics related to food and nutrition, and encouraging the dissemination of nutritional knowledge [19]. Another important portal in Australia is Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA). DAA is a national pro-

professional association with branches in all states and regions in Australia. DAA was founded by the Dietitians Association of Australia in 1976. The Society is a leader for better food, improved health and well-being for all Australians. As its mission, the Society provides the apex of professional diet and nutrition as well as strategic leadership in food and nutrition through empowerment, support, education, authentication and communication [20].

The results suggest that the public content of the Australian nutrition and dietetic portals include nutrition news, annual statistics, calendar of events, job opportunities, general nutrition, adult nutrition, nutrition for children and adolescents, elderly nutrition, sports nutrition, school nutrition, diets for various diseases, nutritional information and vegetarian diets. The portals also contain e-newsletters and media alerts. The unique features of the Australian nutrition portals include politics, healthy life pyramid, clinical guidelines, professional standards and rules, self-assessment software, labeling foods, and various sports activities. The educational contents of the Australian portals include national conferences, annual scientific meetings, educational newsletters, lectures and slides. The portals also provide online book, poster and pamphlet ordering, evidence-based practice in nutrition, as well as diet books and magazines [10, 20].

Web portal technology is considered as a part of e-health strategic plan in Canada due to its efficiency in integrating software packages, services and web-based data [21]. Shim and Sorrells described the portal development as a strategy for the success of e-health system [22]. The importance of web portal technology has been recognized in Iran. According to Torabi *et al.*, the development of organizational portals is necessary to integrate activities in line with the implementation of e-health in Iran [23].

The most common content of American, Canadian and Australian portals include statistics, news and calendar of events on diet and nutrition. In addition, all portals provide information on job opportunities [10, 15, 19]. Furthermore, all of these three portals provide information on nutrition and diet in disease and different periods of life [11, 16, 20]. However, only the American portal provides nutritional information for men and nutrition in different seasons [12]. The results showed that all portals provide information on policies, professional standards and instructions and guidelines related to nutrition and diet. However, nutrition support services, remote health services and food fortification are embedded only in the American and Canadian portals [11, 16]. Nutrition services for

the elderly at home and nutrition services in long-term care centers and hospitals are the unique features of the Canadian portal [15].

Training is the common aspect of nutrition and dietetic portals in the selected countries. However, online training and specialized nutrition forums are available only in the American and Canadian portals. Video library is of the items included only in the American portal. One of the most crucial aspects of the nutrition and dietetic portals is training services to professionals, students and the public. All portals provide access to books, newspapers, magazines, journals as well as online book ordering through online stores [10, 15, 19]. The results indicated that the Canadian portal provide more comprehensive links to the relevant websites. The dynamic links to organizations and institutions is essential for a nutrition and dietetic portal.

Conclusions

According to what discussed, establishing a specialized portal with all desirable features and specifications is contingent on continuing analysis of the expectations and needs of end users and relying on a credible scientific background. In addition, the major requirement for the integration of services and content offered by the portal is the active presence of a government entity to coordinate the activities in the field of nutrition and diet.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interest.

Authors' Contributions

The authors made equal contributions to this study.

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