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The role of nutritionists in outpatient cardiac rehabilitation: Is the patient at the center of care?

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Cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of mortality in the Republic of Croatia[1], making outpatient cardiac rehabilitation (OCR) an important component of secondary prevention. The multidisciplinary OCR team consists of a cardiologist, a nurse, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, a psychologist, and other healthcare professionals. Their goals extend beyond improving functional capacity and include reducing modifiable risk factors, improving quality of life, promoting the long-term adoption of healthy lifestyle habits, and educating patients and their family members, with the aim of reducing the risk of recurrent cardiovascular events. Among the members of the multidisciplinary team, the nutritionist also plays an important role.[2] Given the growing health challenges of overweight, obesity, and diabetes, the involvement of a nutritionist through an individualized or multidisciplinary approach may contribute to better recovery outcomes in OCR. This extended abstract discusses the role of nutritionists in multidisciplinary OCR and the need for their formal integration into patient care.

Cardiovascular patients enrolled in OCR frequently present with arterial hypertension, dyslipidemia, diabetes, obesity, or overweight. At Institute for Cardiovascular Prevention and Rehabilitation, more than 27.5% of patients have diabetes/glucose intolerance, while 88.4% experience problems related to overweight or obesity.[3] These figures highlight the role of nutritionists in patient care. By applying their professional knowledge, conducting individualized nutritional status assessments, identifying high-risk dietary patterns, and developing personalized nutrition plans tailored to each patient's health status, treatment, cardiovascular risk, and living circumstances, nutritionists could contribute to improved treatment outcomes.[4]

Considering the high prevalence of overweight and obesity, which may be associated with slower recovery process in rehabilitation patients, the role of the nutritionist extends beyond health education. It represents an important component of secondary prevention and comprehensive patient care. Therefore, formal recognition of nutritionists by the Croatian Health Insurance Fund as a member of the multidisciplinary OCR team would help to ensure more comprehensive care and better recovery outcomes for patients.

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