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Unsatisfactory knowledge and use of terminology regarding malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia among dietitians in Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden

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Background and aims: Clinical signs of malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia overlap, as they all imply muscle wasting. However the underlying mechanisms differ fundamentally and therefore distinction between these phenomena has therapeutic and prognostic implications. We aimed to determine whether dietitians in selected European countries have 'sufficient knowledge' regarding malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia, and use these terms in their daily work.

Methods: An anonymous online survey was performed among dietitians in Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. 'Sufficient knowledge' was defined as having mentioned at least two of the three common domains of malnutrition: 'nutritional balance', 'body composition' and 'functionality and clinical outcome', and a correct answer to three cases on starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia.

Results: From the 712 respondents, 369 were included in the analysis (5% of the invited 7186). The term 'malnutrition' is being used in practice by 88% of the respondents, and starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia by 3%, 30% and 12% respectively. The cases on starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia were correctly identified by 58%, 43% and 74%. 13% of the respondents had 'sufficient knowledge'. The proportion of respondents with 'sufficient knowledge' was significantly higher in those working in a hospital or municipality (16%, $P < 0.041$), as compared to those working in other settings (7%).

Conclusion: The results of our survey among dietitians in four European countries show that the percentage of dietitians with 'sufficient knowledge' regarding malnutrition, starvation, cachexia and sarcopenia is unsatisfactory (13%) and that these terms are not often used by dietitians in daily practice. Identifying cases is performed better than the theoretical understanding of the concept of malnutrition.

Disclosure of Interest: None to declare