

When Food is Medicine: Patients Learn to Heal from the Inside Out

MAHEC Welcomes Registered Dietitians and WCU Dietetic Interns



A Recipe for Whole-Person Care

“There are very few primary care practices that have dietitians on staff full time,” Fred explains.

“It is exciting to me that a healthcare organization as large and influential as MAHEC has identified nutrition as important in the process of caring for patients.”

Because MAHEC has family medicine, ob/gyn, and other residency programs, Fred and Kristy have the opportunity to impact more than just MAHEC’s patients by empowering residents to carry what they learn about nutrition into their future medical practices.

“At MAHEC we have a culture of interdisciplinary teamwork,” explains **Lisa LaVallee, MD**, director of the Family Practice Residency Program. “We have fully integrated clinical pharmacy and behavioral medicine into the care of our patients, and now we have expanded our team to include dietitians.

Registered dietitians, Kristy Ponce, RDN, and Fred Stichel, MHS, RDN, support patients, residents and WCU dietetic interns at MAHEC’s Biltmore Campus.

Kristy Ponce, RDN, LDN, was convinced she wanted to be a nurse when she grew up. A running injury in high school slowed her down temporarily, but it didn’t sidetrack her.

After graduation, she took a job as a certified nurse assistant at a hospital in Florida where she lived. She also enrolled at the local college in preparation for nursing school. Then she began to notice something curious.

She kept seeing the same patients over and over again on the cardiovascular unit where she worked. She realized many of these patients wouldn’t keep coming back if they changed their diet.

“Food is medicine,” Kristy shares. “Changing my diet helped me heal after my running injury. But I really learned the importance of diet when I worked with these heart patients.”

She decided to switch from nursing to nutrition and has never regretted her decision.

“I love helping people learn how to heal from the inside out,” she admits.

Kristy is one of two registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) embedded full time at the Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) at Biltmore.

The other is **Fred Stichel, MS, RDN, LDN**, who works with patients one-on-one and in group clinics at the Family Health Center where he supports people with metabolic disorders, diabetes and obesity.

Fred is a seasoned dietitian with experience working in hospitals and pediatric and family health clinics across WNC. He’s also a former biology teacher, and he draws on his teaching skills every day as he educates patients, caregivers, residents, and faculty about the importance of nutrition for disease prevention and treatment.

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“This is a particularly powerful addition to the team because of the epidemic of obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases that we see here,” she adds.

“There are many metabolic conditions that are lifestyle related, lifestyle treatable and, in many cases, reversible,” Fred shares.

“Dietary changes and exercise can impact high blood pressure, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, metabolic syndrome, inflammatory conditions—the list goes on and on.”

We’ve long known that diet and exercise can have a major impact on a host of health conditions. For example, FDA-approved labels for Type II diabetes indicate that medication is to be used “as an adjunct to diet and exercise to improve glycemic control,” not as a replacement for them.

So why does medication seem to get so much emphasis?

“Change is a process,” Fred shares. “When you are trying to make dietary and exercise changes, it helps to work with a dietitian over time. It’s not a quick fix. But neither is relying solely on medication.”

In fact, prescription medications can sometimes be part of the problem, especially for patients experiencing drug interactions that cause unpleasant side effects or nutritional deficiencies.

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“With dietary changes, we may be able to eliminate some medications over time or reduce the dose necessary to successfully manage a chronic condition,” Kristy shares.

“Working with our providers and pharmacists during office visits, we can get patients nutritional information they might not otherwise seek out or know how to access or use.”

This kind of real-time support can be critical for the pregnant patients Kristy supports who are navigating food safety issues, changing nutritional requirements, or health complications like gestational diabetes or substance use disorders.

“If we can get our moms’ diet regulated, we often see their blood sugar numbers drop significantly in a relatively short period of time,” Kristy shares. “These dietary interventions can prevent pre-term labor, babies who are large for their gestational age, and traumatic birthing experiences.”

Training the Next Generation

In addition to helping train family medicine and ob/gyn residents, Kristy and Fred are preceptors for students in the post-graduate dietetic internship program at Western Carolina University (WCU).

This year, [11 WCU dietetic interns](#) will have clinical rotations here at MAHEC, a program expansion made possible by state funding allocated to address our region’s healthcare workforce shortage.

WCU’s Dietetic Internship Program Director **Sherry Robison, MS, RDN, LDN**, cites a number of advantages with MAHEC’s recent hire of two registered dietitians.

“MAHEC’s hiring of two full-time RDNs promotes the benefits of access to medical nutrition therapy for patients and employees, interprofessional education for residents, and supervised practice experience for WCU dietetic interns,” Sherry explains.

Multiple studies provide evidence to support the value of dietitians in disease prevention, positive health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs.

“Rotation experiences at MAHEC will strengthen our dietetic interns’ preparation to provide comprehensive medical nutrition therapy, effective nutrition counseling to promote client behavior change and engagement as a member of the healthcare team,” Sherry notes.

“In turn, our program graduates will be equipped to fulfill the increased demand for RDNs in regional primary care settings in response to healthcare’s increased emphasis on disease prevention and expanded insurance coverage for nutrition services,” she adds.

Julia Savoy, who just started her rotation at Ob/Gyn Specialists, is excited to learn that there is a role for registered dietitians in primary care here at MAHEC.



WCU Dietetic Interns Julia Savoy and Destin Hubbard at MAHEC.

“I grew up in home that was very nutrition focused,” Julia shares. “I knew I wanted to work in nutrition from an early age. Diet and exercise have always been a part of my life.” These approaches have been instrumental in helping Julia manage her polycystic ovary syndrome, a hormonal condition that can lead to metabolic syndrome and Type II diabetes if not treated properly.

Her personal history might explain why Julia is drawn to helping patients manage chronic health conditions like renal failure and cardiovascular disease, conditions she worked with as a dietary aide at a hospital in Shelby, NC before returning to WCU.

Destin Hubbard, who is completing her clinical rotation at MAHEC’s Family Health Center, didn’t always want to be a dietitian. In fact, she had never heard of them until she was 17, when her grandfather was referred to one because of his heart disease. This sparked her interest and, after learning more, she decided she wanted to become a registered dietitian. Now, 6 years later, she’s almost reached her goal.

“I’m excited to go into clinical practice after I graduate,” Destin shares. She’s keeping her options open but would love to work with young women to help them develop a healthy relationship with food.

Destin’s also setting her sights on improving public health through nutrition, perhaps by working with a policy action team that oversees food additives or school meal nutritional guidelines.

Given MAHEC’s broader population health focus, she’s off to a good start.