



Bringing even more to life

Watsons Your Personal Store has become more personal by getting directly involved with how customers are nourished. Since late last year, Hong Kong's leading health and beauty chain has stationed registered dietitians in seven Watsons stores. They dispense professional but practical advice on how to eat better, stay healthier and use nutrition to help manage medical conditions.



FOR MANY HONG KONG PEOPLE the word “dietitian” conjures images of a pricey weight-loss guru in a beauty centre, or of waiting in an over-stretched public hospital for a few precious minutes with a nutritional expert referred by a doctor. Watsons is helping to change not only the perception but the reality.

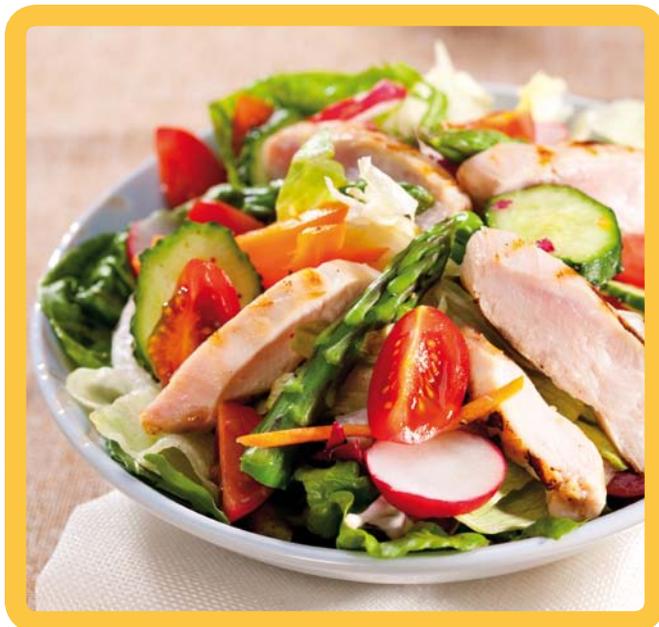
It has cast its net wider into the community by offering paying customers fast and convenient access to registered dietitians who address practical concerns ranging from “am I too fat?”, to “how much coffee can I drink?”, to “can a diabetic eat rice?”

“Our aim is to create a way for the community to benefit from the expertise of a registered dietitian exactly when and where they need one,” explained Margaret Lau, Watsons’ Operations Controller, Health & Fitness, as well as the chain’s Chief Pharmacist.

“We’re happy to see that people are becoming more health conscious. They are demanding more professional healthcare advice.” As a big chain Watsons is in a prime position, she believes, to educate citizens on health and lifestyle issues. “We already provided pharmacists, nurses, health and fitness advisors,” said Ms Lau. “But more and more customers were asking our pharmacists for dietary solutions as well as medication. So we decided to add registered dietitians.”

The first seven stores offering the service are located in the New Territories (Yuen Long, Fanling and Tai Po), Kowloon (Tsim Sha Tsui and Jordan) and on Hong Kong Island (Aberdeen and Taikoo Shing). Each dietitian sees about four clients per day, but the number is rising as more Hong Kong residents learn about the service.

UK-trained registered dietitian Wendy Liu, who leads Watsons recently recruited dietitian team, is personally spreading the word. With her nine colleagues she regularly participates in radio shows to give tips about diet and health, writes articles for local newspapers and delivers educational talks to corporations, including lunch time seminars for employees at Watsons’ New Territories headquarters in Fo Tan and Hutchison Whampoa Properties at Whampoa Garden in Hunghom.





Patrons of the service come mainly from one or more of three groups: pregnant women, people who are overweight or underweight and those with chronic medical conditions including the three “highs” (high blood pressure, high blood sugar and high cholesterol). Ms Liu believes these three groups cover most of Hong Kong’s population. For example, an estimated one in 10 Hong Kong people are diabetic.

“Many are in need of dietary advice but cannot readily find it from a doctor or a hospital and don’t know where else to seek it,” said Ms Liu. This is a pity, she added, as many conditions, such as high blood pressure, can be better managed by having the right diet as well as the right medication. Dietitians are also able to address common misperceptions, such as the myth that diabetics should never eat rice or sweet food.

Down-to-earth approach

In the privacy of a proper consulting room, a first session with a Watsons’ dietitian begins with a thorough assessment of the client’s health needs and objectives, along with an analysis of his or her medical history, individual lifestyle and social context. “We understand that overloading our clients with scientific advice will only confuse them,” said Ms Liu. “So we aim to make our advice as personal, practical and useful as possible.”

A major “plus” is the time Watsons’ dietitians spend with each client. The all-important first consultation lasts between 40 to 45 minutes, which is about double the time dietitians in public hospitals are usually able to spend with patients, according to Ms Liu. “This extra time allows us to understand our patients more thoroughly and discuss their unique needs in detail.”

Typically, clients’ needs are diverse. “For example, we have clients who want to establish healthier eating patterns, but who also eat out for every meal,” Ms Liu noted. “We have developed a great way of helping them decide not only what not to eat when they are in a restaurant, but also what to choose, instead.” All the dietitians keep sample menus in their consultation rooms to help clients make healthier restaurant choices based on real options within their preferred cuisines.

Service synergies

A fundamental goal of the new service is to cooperate closely with other healthcare professionals, including Watsons pharmacists. “Although our dietitian service is not about selling products to clients, being located in the pharmacy setting allows for a truly holistic approach to helping people become healthier by individually managing both their diets and medications,” explained Chief Pharmacist Margaret Lau. “There is a great synergy between the two services.”

Watsons has also informed neighbourhood physicians of the presence of registered dietitians in nearby stores. If the dieticians receive a referral letter from one of these doctors, they will send that physician a report after they have seen his or her patient and work closely with the doctor on follow-up action.

“This is another great advantage of our service,” said Ms Liu. “Monitoring and follow-up appointments are readily available at Watsons, whereas usually you must have a doctor’s referral to see



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a dietitian in a public hospital, even if it is for a follow-up appointment. For many clients, monitoring and convenience are key motivations for seeking help.”

Practical challenges

Implementing the new service has not been without challenges. With retail space so precious in Hong Kong, a strategic approach has been needed to carve out areas in existing stores for the dietitians’ consultation rooms.

Another challenge has been overcoming lack of local understanding about what dietitians do. “People tend to think that dietitians equal weight loss, when in fact, we offer so much more. Aside from helping in the control of disease, we play a major role in children’s health and nutrition,” said Ms Liu.

In addition, many people are confused about the difference between a nutritionist and a dietitian. “While nutritionists have a great deal of scientific knowledge about nutrients and how they interact, they usually do not have clinical training to apply that knowledge to individuals, especially to people with diseases,” Ms Liu explained. Dietitians, she said, were trained not just to know about nutrients in food but which foods work together to meet an individual’s specific nutritional, medical and health needs.

Pharmacists faced a similar challenge 20 years ago, recalled Ms Lau. “Most people did not realise that we were experts in medicine,” she said. “Over the years, that has changed. Now, pharmacists are regarded as health and medication consultants.” She hopes public awareness about the role of dietitians will be similarly raised. “We want to let more and more clients and citizens know what a dietitian can do to help them and their families lead a more healthy life.”

Perfect timing

For Ms Liu, heading the team behind Watsons’ newest health-related service is a

dream come true. As a trainee in Scotland, she had already decided she would prefer to practise in a community rather than a hospital setting.

“Hospital dietitians do amazing work. They help sick people and those in urgent needs,” she said. “But because we eat several times every day, helping people with their diets is a good way to help them stay healthy and prevent illness.” She passionately believed that food was more than just fuel – it was also about society and culture. “I felt I could do more with disease prevention and health promotion by working in the community,” she said. “I wanted to make an impact on people’s everyday lives.”

On returning to Hong Kong to pursue her career, Ms Liu had few opportunities to realise her vision. At least, that was the situation until about a year ago, when Watsons came along with its plan for in-store dietitians. “I was so glad to discover that we shared the same vision,” said Ms Liu. “It was really good timing and a wonderful opportunity for which I’m so thankful.” 

Registered dietitians Tinny Chan and Wendy Liu (*centre*) consult with in-shop pharmacist Alan Choy at Watsons in Jordan, one of seven stores where the new nutrition and dietary service is offered.

