

# INTERVIEW:

Joel Feren APD, AN &  
Andy De Santis RD, MPH

*Dietetics is a field that is vastly dominated by women. Seeing as you are both male dietitians (a.k.a unicorns) what advantages or disadvantages have you experienced due to your novel positions?*

**Joel:** I think it's important to have a point of difference in our profession. For me, that difference is an obvious one. I really try to use my gender to my advantage. Many blokes struggle to consult with a female practitioner and may relate better to another man. I want to be that male practitioner for men who want to change their diet. On the flipside to that, there may be a number of women who may not feel comfortable consulting with a man.

**Andy:** I've definitely noticed a few perks of being a male dietitian. From a social media perspective, it certainly helps you stand out and in a way adds that little bit extra of attention or even value to your message. From a professional perspective, I think the biggest advantage is that there are a demographic of people out there (both male and female) who just would prefer to see a male practitioner. I speak to that from an anecdotal perspective as I've had many clients tell me just that. I suppose there is a flipside to that, and you lose out on clients who would rather see a female dietitian!

*Let me throw a scenario at you. A client walks into your office who is very excited about taking supplement X, which you know has been shown to be ineffective, or trying fad diet Y. What approaches do take with them to ensure the best possible outcomes?*

**Joel:** I'm pretty up front about my feelings about dodgy supplements and fad diets. With that said, it's important to provide the client with the evidence as to why either the supplement or diet may not be appropriate or effective. It's vital to maintain a client's trust during the process. Often clients have been led astray by a family member, colleague or alternative health practitioner, so it is important to approach the subject tactfully as not break that trust. If that confidence is broken the client won't return and probably won't deem you as credible. That's the worst-case scenario. It's really important to pick your battles appropriately.

**Andy:** This is a tough one in some ways because it leaves you a bit torn between being an objective, evidence-based professional and not treating your clients in a condescending way. If a supplement or diet was being attempted that I knew was not in the best interest of the client (or for which the client expected an unrealistic effect) I would certainly give my feedback on the subject in a respectful manner. At the end of the day though, as long as there was no risk of harm, I would not have a problem letting the client give it a try if that is truly something they wanted to do (even if my professional suggestion was to the contrary). It is their decision at the end of the day.

*Both of you are involved in science communication, be it through your YouTube show ([Dudes Talk Nutrition](#)), blogs, or in an official capacity for nutrition organizations. What strategies have been successful or unsuccessful in engaging your audience that other practitioners may benefit from.*

**Joel:** It is our job to translate the evidence in a way that the common person can understand. This is what dietitians are trained to do. It can be difficult at times to make sense of complex nutrition science. The key is to deliver the central message/s in an engaging, novel and fun way. People seem to respond well to someone who is personable so it's vital to be human and to allow your quirks and idiosyncrasies to come through. I've certainly tried to maintain that through my social media profiles and something that Andy and I also try to harness with *Dudes Talk Nutrition*. However, I'm still trying to plug away by testing the waters to see what resonates with my audience. It's a work in progress.

Further, I think it's crucial that dietitians embrace social media to communicate a message in a different and unique way that will restore dietitians as the most credible nutrition voices in the community. Because unfortunately our image at present is somewhat tarnished.

**Andy:** I have definitely learned a lot about what works and what doesn't just purely from producing a large body of content over the past year. I do a great deal of science communication through my blog and a variety of online platforms, and I use my social media account to help spread the word. One of my most popular articles in the early days was "[The 9 Foods You Need To Balance Your Diet](#)", which was based on population nutrient intake data and the healthful foods that could fill those gaps in the average person. This may sound obvious, but I learned from that article how important it is to make my work as easy and relevant as possible for the reader. This sounds obvious but until you kind of go through it, you don't realize how important it is. Another very effective strategy that I have found is to

engage your audience in reflecting on their own habits. For example, asking them about the foods they never ate when they were younger but love now or asking them the four [foods they would take with them on an island](#). I find framing content in that way is very useful to improve engagement. Of course, the other thing that I try to do is always add a bit of humor, and this is especially apparent on my Instagram account. I have found that cleverness and humor can pique interest, and strong content can keep interest.

*We have a societal perception that women are more actively engaged in their nutrition decisions than men are. Seeing how around 90% of the dietetics profession is women, there may be a good basis for this argument. In your experience, do you believe this perception is true? Are messages about nutrition just not reaching males? Or is this perception totally off? Somewhere in between?*

**Joel:** I think you've hit the nail on the head! I don't necessarily have the answer about why the nutrition message isn't getting that cut-through with a male audience. That is one of the reasons why Andy and I started our YouTube channel. We want to explore topics that we think blokes will be interested in – supplement use, protein requirements, diet fads and current health/diet trends. However, I think slowly but surely things are starting to change. Hopefully, Andy and I can be the drivers of that change to make nutrition more of a focus with our male audience.

**Andy:** This is a very interesting question. I actually just wrote an article for [PlantBasedNews.org](#) a few weeks back exploring [why only 1/3 of vegans are males](#), so there is definitely at least some substance to that assertion. Even going anecdotally by my experience with social media, when it comes to the food and nutrition themed pages they are certainly dominated by females. I can say, however, that I do get a good portion of male clients into my private practice so maybe all we need is a few more strong male voices out there to help reach that demographic!

*We here at Examine.com are a little obsessed with supplements. But the use or non-use of supplements is very context dependent. In that light, could you relay a story of when you recommended a supplement to a client and why it was a good fit for their situation? Or, on the flip side, a story of when you phased a client off a supplement?*

**Joel:** Supplements can help to ensure someone meets their nutritional requirements. I consult in aged care (on a part-time basis) and often recommend protein and energy supplements to ensure elderly residents maintain good nutrition to avoid the myriad consequences that can arise as a result of being undernourished. Contrary to that, I have a particular bugbear with vitamin supplements being used by the ‘worried well’. Vitamins are only necessary to prevent the deficiency they cause. Often supplements provide a large dose of a vitamin – so much more than what the body requires. High doses of vitamins can be toxic in the long term. From my perspective, it is important to ensure vitamin pills are used under medical guidance.

I once saw a client who was advised to take an iron supplement because his personal trainer thought it would boost his energy levels. The client reported that

he hadn’t seen a doctor in many years and as such didn’t have a recent blood test to validate whether he actually needed the supplement. My jaw almost dropped to the floor! After explaining to the client the dangers of taking an iron supplement willy-nilly and without a known deficiency he quickly ceased it. And he finally saw his GP for a full blood review – thankfully!

**Andy:** I rarely find myself recommending supplements to my primary demographic of clients who see me primarily for general healthy eating and weight loss. From a vitamin/mineral perspective, I find that my clients are very open to my suggestions from a nutritional perspective and very rarely end up requiring supplementation. The one situation where supplementation does come up is with the more athletic and active clients, where we might discuss the merits of creatine or caffeine supplementation. This is easier to do given the body of sports science research behind the use of such supplements for athletic performance. For the average client, I’d be more likely to tell them they don’t particularly need a given supplement and would be better off spending that money getting the nutrition through a whole food source.



Joel Feren is an Australian-based Accredited Practising Dietitian. He works across a number of areas – private practice, aged care, corporate health and sports nutrition. He is also a keen writer and blogger. Check out his blog at [HeartyNutrition.com.au](http://HeartyNutrition.com.au). He is active on social media ([Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)) and aims to showcase typically manly meals that the common bloke can whip up quickly and easily at home. He also has a penchant for cooking aprons and is a keen cook – albeit a Masterchef rejectee.



Andy De Santis, MPH RD, is a private practice dietitian and nutrition writer/blogger. He lives and works in Toronto, Ontario and you can learn more about this practice at [AndyTheRD.com](http://AndyTheRD.com). When he isn’t helping people lead healthier lives, he is probably either eating healthy himself or playing soccer. Andy also runs a very active and very entertaining [Instagram account that you should certainly take a peek at](#).