

Hospital food - the food journey

You told us about very different experiences of hospital food at North Tyneside General Hospital - from “wonderful” to “appalling”.

So we asked experienced Healthwatch volunteers, Joyce Greely and Joan Hancock, to find out more. Joyce is passionate about fresh, locally sourced food and Joan brings insight gained from working in the health service for many years.

We wanted to understand the hospital food journey from arriving in the kitchen to when it reaches the patient. Catering manager, Wayne Roper, spent the morning with Joyce and Joan walking them through the food journey and answering questions. And of course they both stayed for lunch.

This is what they found out.

Frozen food or fresh food?

We had a good discussion regarding this subject. The kitchen does not have the facilities to cook 500 fresh meals twice a day, while sandwiches and salad are prepared in the kitchens most food is supplied ready cooked and frozen using a new method by a Shropshire company called Apetito.

All food is now ‘blast frozen’ after being cooked and cooled. By using the blast freezing method the nutritional content, flavour, colour, texture and quality of every meal is maintained. There should be no loss of liquid, flavour or firmness.

Before using this system there was a problem if staff went off sick and it could be chaotic. Government guidelines and health and safety implications make frozen food more practical and probably safer. Each meal needs to be traceable. In the event of a complaint, food delivered to any patient on any ward can be tracked by a bar code from the carton it came in which is systematically recorded on the hospital system, and the staff member who handled it by their staff rota sheets. This helps to avoid contamination but also supports the tight control from the receipt of food at the back door to the delivery of a hot meal to the patient.

Staff can order food for special diets from other suppliers. The catering department work closely with dieticians.

Into the kitchen

The food is received into the kitchen preparation and storage area in sealed trays similar to that of a takeaway meal, the only difference being that the trays are of varying sizes. As orders are gathered from patients the previous day and sent to the kitchen technology system this facilitates say, a serving for ten people on a ward in a large tray for a popular meal or a small tray that would serve two for a vegetarian meal for example. There is therefore little or no waste.

The food is reheated in a longer time than the conventional method ensuring that it does not dry out and that it is heated right through to the correct temperature.

Kitchen staff 'pick' their orders for their allocated ward, selected by patients the day before, and work out how many large medium or small cartons they need for each course. They put the cartons in a special trolley, plug it in to start the heating process, put a timer on then simply switch to other jobs. This can include cleaning down surfaces or preparing sandwiches whilst others start the selection process (picking) for the next meal.

Time is very tightly controlled and there seemed to be no one standing around.

Whilst heating in the special trolleys the food is regularly checked for temperature by staff with the use of a probe thermometer. This ensures that the food arrives at a patient's bedside at the right temperature and looking appetising.

This new method of catering for patients with varying needs ensures that there is little waste, food is hygienically cooked and is kept sealed and covered until the very last moment when it is served outside the ward by the same member of kitchen staff who had 'picked it' and heated it. This cuts down on the possibility of contamination but also facilitates the tracing of the food through the chain if it does occur. It is then taken to the patient's bedside by a member of staff called a meal hostess.

Arriving at the ward

Prior to hostesses taking the trolley to the ward they check that the food is the correct temperature. Once in the ward the temperature is checked again before the hostess puts it onto plates for staff to serve. All soups are served first followed by main course and puddings. On their visit Joyce and Joan each followed a separate hostess to the ward. Joan was very impressed by the hostess she accompanied, she was cheerful, showed attention to detail and recognised the importance of food to patients.

It is a very efficient system in general but can be problematic when there have been admissions and discharges and some patients forgot what they ordered. We spoke to one patient who had been in two days and said that the food had been not very good until today when she got what she ordered and thought it was great.

Condiments

Food has little or no salt added. Condiments, such as salt and pepper, are supplied on the ward and come already wrapped in napkins containing the cutlery. Other condiments such as vinegar and sauces are also available on the ward.

Choice and quality

We plan to find out more about choice and quality when we ask you about your experiences. Look out for Healthwatch volunteers in North Tyneside General Hospital. If you've been in hospital recently you can fill in our online form, please

be sure to tell us when you were in hospital and which ward you are on as well as telling us about your meals.

From their visit Joan and Joyce felt there was a good choice, the menu rotates on a two week cycle and consists of summer and winter variations. We'll be asking people in hospital if they agree and also if there's enough choice if you want halal or vegetarian food for instance. Our volunteers enjoyed the food they ate at lunchtime, after her lamb hot-pot Joyce said. "I would not have known this was not a freshly cooked meal." When they observed food being plated up by hostesses on the wards, they noted that the food looked appetising and in particular that the cauliflower wasn't mushy - often a problem with frozen food.

As a true Scot, Joan finds the Geordie preference for gravy with everything puzzling. She would like more room to express a preference when ordering food.

The catering team provide continental style breakfasts for most wards, cooked breakfast is available on some wards where dieticians recommend it. Which brings us to toast! While many of us can eat toast when we don't feel up to other food, it's not available in hospital because toasters are a frequent cause of fire alarms and the high cost and disruption of calling out the fire service.

There are some issues about availability of hot meals once the kitchen is closed. However snack bags are available containing fruit juice, sandwich and crisps.

The hot cooked meals for staff are made on site. Curries and soups are made up using packet ingredients. Sandwiches are imported ready packaged. The clinical staff we spoke to were not aware their food was different from patients.

Summary

This is a very efficient system, particularly when considering the exacting requirements and budget available.

Joan and Joyce were very impressed by most of the catering staff they met. Wayne Roper, the catering manager, really stood out as doing his best to provide good food for patients at North Tyneside General Hospital. Our volunteers then went on to find out more about the patient's experience.

For more information about our work on hospital food go to www.healthwatchnorthtyneside.co.uk or call 0191 263 5321.

October 2014