



Food and Society Policy Fellows

Hospital Food That Won't Make You Sick

By Laura Landro, Quotes Preston Maring
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Gregory Gross used to deliver meal trays in a hospital as a part-time high-school job. He knew what hospital food was like. But when the 57-year-old spent a week recently at Kaiser Permanente's South Sacramento Medical Center for a severe infection, he says he was "stunned." He had a choice of tantalizing dinner options, such as ancho-citrus marinated loin of pork, along with seven-grain bread and fresh local fruit. His favorite lunch: freshly made hot squash soup, tuna on pita bread and whole-wheat crackers.

"I thought all you ever got was over-sweetened fruit from cans where it had been sitting for a year," says Mr. Gross, a tour-bus driver.

Traditionally known for unappetizing and even unhealthy food, hospitals are overhauling their food services, offering better-tasting, fresher and more nutritious cuisine, and giving patients more control over what and when they eat. The days of mystery meat and Jell-O delivered on a tray at noon and 6 p.m. -- regardless of whether patients are ready or able to eat -- are giving way to hotel-style room service and dining options that let patients order off a restaurant-quality menu from a bedside wait staff.

Patients can order dishes such as almond chicken with pomegranate sauce -- or oven-roasted potatoes tossed with olive oil and dried herbs as a healthier alternative to the old mashed instant. And for visitors and employees, hospitals are scrapping institutional cafeterias and fast-food franchises in favor of restaurant-style dining rooms and take-out counters with healthy items, including low-fat desserts.

In part, the changes are driven by new emphasis on boosting customer satisfaction with food service, which often gets the worst scores in hospital surveys. But with the growing obesity epidemic and rising rates of diabetes and heart disease, the more ambitious goal is to improve health outcomes beyond the hospital. Hoping to change eating habits, hospitals are offering community cooking classes, sponsoring local farmer's markets and providing outpatient nutrition counseling.

Trained chefs at hospitals are creating restaurant-quality recipes, even for patients on restricted diets that require limited salt, fat and sugar. To showcase their talents, they are competing in Iron Chef-style contests around the country such as next week's Battle of the Hospital Chefs in Chicago. Some hospitals are also embracing a socially conscious approach in the kitchen, serving more organic, locally produced food.



Many hospitals aren't taking all the comfort foods off their menu, and will offer up mashed potatoes and gravy if that's the only thing patients will eat. But "comfort foods are changing with the generations," says Debby Kasper, manager of clinical nutrition at Premier Inc., a purchasing alliance of nonprofit hospitals that is sponsoring culinary clinics for chefs. "Patients who want comfort now might be looking for portobello mushrooms and asiago cheese."

Stan Hodes, a former hotel and cruise-ship chef who is now executive chef at Premier member Baptist Health South Florida in Miami, says that when he first arrived 15 years ago, the menu consisted of items like "the 1,000 calorie lunch" -- chicken-a-la-king in a pastry shell. Today, Mr. Hodes has replaced fryers with steamers and dropped heavy sauces, and is offering entrees like grilled turkey on polenta with tomato salsa. ([See the recipe.](#))

At Avera Heart Hospital in Sioux Falls, S.D., Joanne Shearer, the new food and nutrition team leader, scrapped plans to buy a double deep fryer in favor of a skillet for stir-fry, and came up with a regional twist on one of the world's healthiest diets, calling it "prairie Mediterranean." The cuisine includes items made with local products such as soybeans, flaxseed, corn and lean beef.

"We can't advertise that we were in the business of keeping people healthy while serving up foods deep-fried in unhealthy fats," says Ms. Shearer. "We have to create a healthy food culture in the hospital."

An executive chef, who oversees menu planning and development, can now be found in half the hospitals that belong to the National Society for Healthcare Foodservice Management. And the group, which represents more than 2,000 food and nutrition professionals at hospitals and long-term care facilities in the U.S. and Canada, says that 22% of members report that they offer room service in their facilities, while 17% are planning to implement room service in the coming year.

At a culinary competition recently sponsored by the food-service management group, top prizes went to hospital chefs who jazzed up a Tyson Farms chicken breast with recipes such as chicken meritage with jasmine rice pilaf, and grilled cilantro lime yogurt chicken. At the Battle of the Hospital Chefs (www.hospitalchefs.com¹), sponsored by Consorta Inc., a Schaumburg, Ill., hospital purchasing consortium, three finalists will compete. They were chosen based on creative meals that were "heart healthy, great-tasting and under \$4.95 per serving."

More than 100 U.S. hospitals have signed a Healthy Food in Health Care pledge sponsored by the nonprofit group Health Care Without Harm (noharm.org²), promising to purchase more organic, locally produced food, as well as food produced and distributed by environmentally friendly, sustainable methods such as using no pesticides or hormones.

To bring fresher farm products into hospital kitchens, Kaiser Permanente, based in Oakland, Calif., has



partnered with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers to put fresh produce grown by local family farmers into 6,000 meals a day served in 19 Northern California hospitals.

Preston Maring, an associate physician-in-chief at Kaiser's Oakland Medical Center, also introduced farmer's markets on hospital grounds in 2003; since then, 37 additional markets have opened at Kaiser facilities, and Dr. Maring recently launched a blog where consumers can learn more about fresh produce and nutrition and find healthy recipes (recipe.kaiser-permanente.org/kp/maring/³).

In some hospitals, Kaiser currently offers restaurant-style menus to patients whose orders are taken by a staffer with a Palm Pilot. It also is testing hotel-style room service, whole-grain pancakes and breads, and entrees that are steamed, grilled or roasted instead of fried.

While the shift to healthier, fresher foods prepared to order can be more labor-intensive and expensive, hospitals say they are able to offset the costs with decreased waste. At Intermountain Healthcare's McKay-Dee Hospital in Ogden, Utah, as many as 80 to 100 hospital trays were delivered to patients that were often untouched or left to be eaten by nursing staff. In the month after the hospital began offering room service, revenue at the hospital's cafe shot up by \$10,000 as staffers began to buy their own food, according to Kathleen Nielsen, director of food services.

And for patients like Moana Jensen, a 64-year-old undergoing treatment for a blood clot, the service works on her schedule: "One day I had a ton of visitors, and I was still able to order lunch after they left at 4 p.m.," she says.

Ohio State University Medical Center, with six different hospitals, has been able to save labor costs by using a laser-driven robotic cart system that transports food and soiled trays via underground tunnels.

With shorter lengths of stay in general in many hospitals, patients often are ready to go home once they are able to eat, so the OSU center also offers outpatient nutrition counseling and behavior-modification programs "to help patients with their nutritional health and well-being in the larger sense," says Mary Angela Miller, OSU's administrative director of food and nutrition, and president of the hospital food-service group.

Of course, sometimes healthy food is a tough sell. In the South Dakota farming community near Avera Heart Hospital, the regional diet includes plenty of red meat and potatoes, as well as fried foods. Ms. Shearer, the nutrition team leader, had dietitians come up with healthier versions, such as roasted potatoes instead of mashed; soy crumbles are substituted for 50% of the ground beef in many recipes. To satisfy cravings for sweet desserts, they developed zucchini and carrot cake made with ground flaxseed.

Not all the efforts to spruce up flavor in leaner products have been successful; the kitchen had to scale



Food and Society Policy Fellows

back on its use of garlic, onions and peppers after patients complained the cooks were using too much.

“We occasionally get a complaint that we serve up too much green stuff,” says Ms. Shearer. “But we are recognized in the community as setting an example of healthful eating rather than just catering to our customers’ worst eating habits.”

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