

Heart of Mersey's Cheshire and Merseyside Hospital Food Project



Introduction

The NHS is one of Europe's largest employers. Of the 1.2 million people employed in the UK, around 300,000 are obese and 400,000 are overweight. The Hospital Food Project initiated by Heart of Mersey a cardiovascular disease prevention charity, pre-empted the DoH's progress report, **Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: One Year On** which urges the public sector to lead by example, in creating an environment that promotes healthy weight.

Supported by Primary Care Trusts, the Cheshire and Merseyside Hospital Food Project has been a unique initiative that focuses on nutrition and healthy eating among NHS employees. The purpose of the project has been to support six Merseyside Trusts, that collectively employ over 20,000 staff, in addressing their NHS corporate citizen responsibilities in order to meet the requirements of the *Choosing Health* white paper and the public health domain for the Healthcare Commission's Assessment of Trusts.

In 2007/08, a baseline audit was undertaken in six hospitals to inform the development of the project. Results from the audit showed a lack of awareness among hospital employees of the efforts by hospitals to support healthier eating and also a gap in nutrition training among hospital catering staff.

Aim

To pilot and evaluate a social marketing intervention to improve the availability and promotion of healthier food options to hospital employees.

Methodology

Phase 1: Training in social marketing so catering managers could more effectively promote the healthier options available to hospital staff

Phase 2: A three month healthy eating campaign to promote and introduce new healthier food options

Phase 3: The Hospital Food Project social steering group was then established with representation from the hospital Trusts. The *Nourish* umbrella brand was developed to provide a uniform approach to promotion of healthier options. Project staff regularly visited the hospitals to provide advice, support and monitor improvements.



Hospitals undertook a variety of different activities to promote healthy eating including:

- Reformulation of menus and recipes
- Increased availability of fruit and healthier snacks
- Improved labelling, positioning and presentation of food
- Promoting healthier options through loyalty cards, meal deals and free tasters
- Use of *Nourish* branded materials such as posters, table talkers and aprons.

An external evaluation of the project was completed in 2009 - involving 1,600 staff questionnaires, focus groups and interviews with catering and communications managers in each of the hospital Trusts.



Quantifiable improvements:

- Reformulating recipes: saturated fat reduced in many meals by 4g per portion
- Healthier baked beans resulted in a reduced salt intake by 0.6g and sugar by 3g
- White rolls replaced with wholegrain resulting in an increase in fibre intake
- Reduction in red meat and an increase in white meat and fish dishes
- Increased uptake of healthy options across Trusts (up to 50% in some products)
- Healthier snacks and healthy 'grab and go' ranges i.e. fruit pots
- Improved salad bars and increased promotion of fruit and vegetables e.g. free vegetables / salad / fruit included in meal deals.

Catering managers highlight key benefits of involvement in the project:

- Networking with other catering managers to share best practice
- Raising the profile of catering departments - more recognition from directors
- Media coverage from their *Nourish* launch day
- Encouraging better health and lifestyle among Trust employees
- Education and insight into packaging of meals and positioning of foods.



Hospital staff views on the impact of the project:

- Satisfaction with catering facilities increased from 36% in 2007 to 42% and dissatisfaction decreased from 35% in 2007 to 27%
- Most agreed choice and quality of food had improved with more healthy options on offer, particularly salads, home made soups, healthy meal deals
- Hospital staff are aware of efforts being made to improve dining experience with theme days & other promotions
- Taste, cost, health and convenience are still the most important criteria for respondents in determining their choice of food and drinks
- Despite only 14% of all respondents considering *Nourish* to have been a successful promotion and 55% continuing to be unaware of any healthy activities or events, awareness of events did increase from 9% in 2007 to 22% and there has been a huge improvement in the awareness of promotional materials.

Other improvements:

- 6% increase in number of staff using restaurant facilities overall from the previous year
- Awareness of healthy eating events increased by 13%
- 35% of staff had noticed changes in positioning of healthy options
- 37% had noticed improvements in salad bar options
- 40% were aware of healthier food promotions
- One in ten staff stated changes made had made an impact on their purchasing & experience
- One third agreed catering & choice of food had improved.



Ensuring changes are sustained post project:

- Heart of Mersey has organised and delivered health awareness raising events in each hospital to support the Food Standards Agency with its national campaigns i.e. Sat Fat & Salt. Hospitals are being encouraged to continue to offer health promoting events in support of national campaigns
- Self-monitoring forms have been introduced so that the hospitals can monitor progress and identify areas for improvement
- The social steering group has expanded its membership to ten Trusts covering over 30,000 employees. The network will continue, catering managers will meet regularly to share best practice. The network group meetings will also help the Trusts to take forward the recommendations made as a result of the evaluation and also the more recent recommendations outlined in the Boorman review of NHS staff health and well being
- Restaurant User Groups (RUG) have been established; hospital staff can meet with catering managers, to discuss food availability and make suggestions for ongoing improvements.