Mealtimes matter

Carol Dight challenges readers to make a pledge to improve one aspect of patient nutrition in the coming year

THE NHS spends about £500 million a year on food and drinks for inpatients, yet there are still inpatients who receive inadequate nutrition and hydration.

Often though, it is not the quality of the food or drink that is the problem, but patients’ inability to get to it while it is still appetising and hot.

I suspect, for example, all of us have struggled at some time with wrappers and packaging, trying to access various items that our patients receive.

Earlier this year, I spoke at the Hospital Caterers Association annual conference, in Birmingham. I focused on personal responsibility, and asked at the end of my presentation that we all made a pledge to improve one aspect of patient nutrition and hydration over the coming year.

I offer you the same challenge.

Quality

We know there is a wide variety in food and drink quality across our hospitals, even though good nutrition and hydration are integral to patient care, and doctors and nurses are as important as catering staff in reducing this variety, for example by ensuring that meal times are not interrupted by routine tasks.

Teamwork is also important. Reflecting on my experiences as an orthopaedic matron, I recall a lovely lady I nursed on a trauma ward after she had fallen and fractured her neck of femur. She also had advanced Alzheimer’s so had difficulty recognising food and, despite her family’s best efforts, she had eaten little before her admission.

We worked collaboratively to provide her favourite meals based on information from her relatives. She liked small portions and having the food presented beautifully. But, despite our best efforts, she refused to eat at times. She talked of her husband, who had died some months before, and she wanted to join ‘Our Jim’.

She was reunited with her Jim two weeks later. I still receive Christmas cards from the family of this ‘little sparrow’, as we called her. Like me, members of her family struggled with whether they had done enough for her, but they, and our catering department staff, had pulled out all the stops and provided super support every mealtime.

Patient stories such as this one are important in our repertoire so we can influence clinical practice; for nurses, it is powerful to describe experiences to encourage others to take similar approaches at every opportunity.

We know, however, that good teamwork is not experienced by all our frail older patients. The number of inpatients who are older is rising so our approach to providing great mealtimes experiences for them remains a challenge.

As well as patient stories, numbers are important too. For instance, do you know how many meals are served every mealtimes in your organisation? At Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, we have about 550 meals per sitting to get right, or wrong, but I know we also have few complaints about food: five in the past year including only one about the quality of inpatient food.

We do not always get things right; we continue to work on special diets and addressing issues of waste, which I am sure is an issue for many areas, but by working collaboratively with our catering teams, ward staff, patients, and their families and carers, we can improve mealtimes.

Nutrition and hydration are a central aspect of the nursing role and should feature in our patient safety work. We are working on incorporating them into our safety scoreboards, so patients know that we monitor what they eat and drink.

We will also continue to be open and honest, saying sorry when we get it wrong, taking responsibility for getting it right next time, and learning lessons, but above all also striving to ensure that nutrition and hydration stay at the top of our care agenda.

As I asked at the Hospital Caterers Association conference: what will your pledge be to improve your patients’ nutrition and hydration over the coming year?

Carol Dight is director of nursing and governance, at Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust.

Find out more

For details of the Hospital Caterers Association, go to www.hospitalcaterers.org
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