

Patient perceptions of NHS hospital food in the U.K; a cross sectional survey

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Background

Malnutrition in hospital patients can have severe clinical consequences and is associated with worse patient outcomes, including poor wound healing, longer length of stay and increased mortality (Agarwal et al, 2013; Brogden, 2013). As most patients are reliant on hospital food to meet their requirements, it is important that hospital food both meets nutritional standards and is appealing to patients; government standards were introduced in 2014 to help achieve these purposes. Few studies have recently explored the perception of the hospital food experience in the UK; the aim of this study was to investigate the perception of the NHS hospital meals in the UK by previous inpatients.

Methods

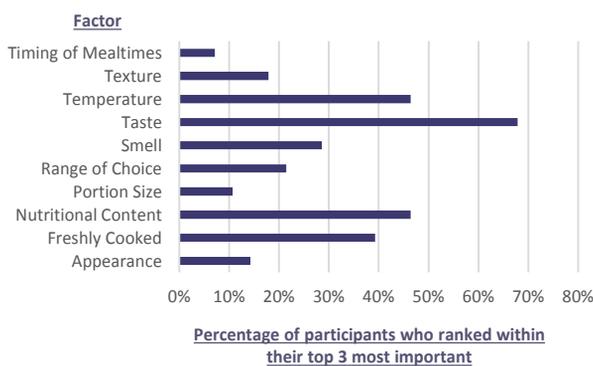
A cross sectional questionnaire analysis of 28 previous UK NHS inpatients aged over 18 recruited via opportunistic, snowball sampling drawn from the researcher's friends and family.

Results

| | Overall satisfaction |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| All years (n=28) | 57% (n=16) |
| ≤2014 - Pre-standards (n=10) | 50% (n=5) |
| 2015-2017 - Post-standards (n=18) | 61% (n=11) |

57% of participants reported overall satisfaction with the hospital food services. Participants with hospital stays post-2014 appeared to report slightly higher satisfaction than those before, although this was not statistically significant ($p=0.569$)

Graph showing participants perceived importance of factors



Taste was considered the most important of factors, ranked in the top 3 by 68% of participants, followed by nutritional content and temperature - both ranked within the top 3 most important by 46% of participants.

| | | Overall satisfaction |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------|
| All (n=28) | | 57% (n=16) |
| 'Nutritional content' rank of perceived importance | High importance 1-5 (n=18) | 44% (n=8) |
| | Low importance 6-10 (n=10) | 80% (n=8) |

Those who consider nutritional content important were more likely to be dissatisfied with hospital food than those who valued nutritional content less, although this did not reach significance ($p=0.069$).

| Statement | | Overall satisfaction |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| 'Hospital food is nutritious' | Agree (n=12) | 83% (n=12) |
| | Neither agree nor disagree (n=10) | 50% (n=5) |
| | Disagree (n=6) | 16% (n=1) |

Those who agreed that hospital food is nutritious were more likely to express overall satisfaction with hospital food services, with statistical significance ($p=0.023$).

Discussion and Conclusion

61% of participants with stays after the introduction of hospital food standards in 2014 expressed overall satisfaction with hospital food services, supporting UNISON (2016) and Department of Health (2017) who suggested further improvements are required in the hospital food service. However, satisfaction appears to be improving over time; those with stays pre-2014 had an overall satisfaction rate of 50%.

Taste is the factor which appears to be considered most important by participants, with both highest average rank and highest rate of appearance in the top 3 most important aspects, consistent with findings by Abdelhafez et al (2012) and Hwang et al (2003).

Nutritional value is also highly valued by participants, with 46% of participants including it in their top three most important factors.

Despite this, only 42% of patients agree that hospital food is nutritious, despite theoretical menus generally offering adequate nutrition for most patients as per the NHS Standards (NHS, 2016).

In conclusion, the findings suggest that patients generally value the taste, temperature and nutritional content of a meal, although the nutritional importance of hospital food goes underestimated.

Understanding patient values and expectations and aligning food services with these may help to improve consumption and reduce reliance on expensive oral nutrition supplements. The dietitian is well-placed to improve perception of hospital food by promoting the nutritional value of hospital meals to patients. A nutritional quality assurance stamp on hospital menus could be a low-cost way to improve patient awareness of the nutritional adequacy of hospital food.

References

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