

Royal Marsden – collaborative food purchasing in London and food at the core of treatment

Medical science suggests that people could help avoid about one third of incidences of some types of cancers by eating more healthily, and food is an integral part of care for cancer patients. Therefore it is not surprising that providing high quality food is a prime objective of a specialist cancer hospital like the Royal Marsden.

The hospital has a mixed catering provision, using ready chilled cooked meals from a commercial supplier, which include vegetarian and healthy options, but supplements this with a 'call order' service for patients, cooking food to order. This service provides mostly light meals such as omelettes but also includes breakfast items and some chicken and fish meals. Over the past couple of years patients have made it clear on the in-house feedback forms that they much prefer the food cooked on premises – and this was reflected in a 50% increase in the call order service last year. At the same time, the ready meal prices have increased steadily and changes to the portion size of packages have helped to increase the overall levels of food waste. The hospital is hoping to cook more food in the hospital in future using local and sustainable ingredients as far as possible.

Where the hospital buys its own food, it uses local produce where possible, notably milk, meat and meat products. Local, good quality fruit and vegetables are supplied by an Ashford based business, 'Fresher by Miles', and the hospital also uses local organic milk from Adena Dairy. Local wholesaler, Middlesex Meats, supply good quality meat at a competitive price from local farmers. Sustainable fish comes from M & J Seafood – patients initially complained about substituting cod with hake, until they tasted it and the hospital has had no complaints since. As hake is now also in danger of being over-fished, the hospital is looking at alternative types of fish. All coffee and tea is fair trade and organic and supplied by a local company, Union Coffee.

The hospital had difficulties finding local suppliers with the necessary accreditation able to meet the volumes needed. Many of those problems were solved when the trust started to work closely with Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, through its Good Food on the Public Plate project. The hospital is part of the 'Chelsea Cluster', a collaboration with the Royal Brompton hospital, Imperial College and Thamesbrook Carehome, assisted by Sustain. The cluster purchases food in bulk – using the discounts this provides to procure higher quality food. However, the collaborations haven't always been successful – the cluster had almost agreed terms with a sausage and bacon supplier when the company suddenly introduced additional delivery costs and minimum order levels into the negotiations, making it uneconomic to continue. Similarly, Dairy House in Herefordshire supplied organic yoghurts but they unfortunately went out of business and the cluster hasn't yet been able to find an alternative supplier.

Despite these problems, the catering team have found the support from Sustain invaluable, not only in finding suppliers but also in dealing with the contract negotiations and looking at other ways of using more sustainable food and supplies. The next focus will be on dry goods which currently come from the national NHS Supply Chain but the hospital is working with Sustain to find local alternatives.

Although the hospital is under less pressure than others to cut food costs because of the clinical importance of food in cancer treatment, the hospital still generates significant

sums from its retail outlets, which are used by staff and visitors – last year the income covered almost 20% of the overall catering budget. The Mulberry Tree Café opened to patients and staff last November, offering meals, a sandwich deli bar and pasties, and even a grill ‘Call Order’ menu and telephone service for evening meals. The Mulberry Tree Coffee Shop in the Wallace Wing also offers snacks, sandwiches and hot drinks.