

Bedford Hospital – a passion for quality ingredients and good cooking

The Bedford Hospital catering team, under Steve Morgan, Director of Operational Support Services, and his Catering Manager, Peter Gillard, concentrate on providing good quality food that people will eat. The catering team are passionate about cooking good quality, healthy, nutritious food at a sensible cost for patients, staff and visitors, coupled with excellent customer service. Steve and Peter believe that whilst hospitals should offer healthy alternatives, they should also offer food that people want to eat. So the hospital offers chips and burgers – but the beef burgers are home made, cooked to order and served with a wholemeal bap and chips are prepared on site from whole potatoes.

Things weren't always this way. When Steve arrived more than 10 years ago, the hospital's food was poor and the retail units were losing money. He simply wanted to improve quality and get his team to enjoy cooking. He went back to basics, cooking from scratch, and improved the skills of his team. Now virtually all meals are cooked on site, using freshly prepared vegetables rather than from pre-prepared packs.

Fresh produce has the best flavour but is also nutritionally better with more vitamins and minerals, so Steve uses local ingredients wherever possible. Most local suppliers are within a 20 mile radius of the hospital – for example eggs are purchased from the wholesaler, AC & KL Twell in Spalding, but are produced by a local farmer in Kempston, five miles away. Fruit and vegetables come from a Bedford wholesaler, who sources as much as possible from East Anglia, one of the UK's main vegetable growing areas. The hospital is also changing its menus to include seasonal vegetables, offering marrow, swede, parsnips and other root veg – which are also cheaper. Bedford's skilled chefs have used interesting recipes to cook these less popular items so people will be encouraged to eat them.

Steve also wanted to introduce a more commercial approach to the retail units, opening up the staff canteen to visitors and outpatients, persuading the hospital to spend money improving the restaurant décor and offering a better range of tastier food. Steve also introduced a novelty in hospital catering – the traditional Sunday Carvery lunch and Daily Chef's Specials – which have proved very popular with local people. Outpatients even time their appointments to eat in the restaurant, with one visitor commenting that the food is 'excellent and worth visiting the hospital for even with no appointment'. This attention to quality and service has paid off – retail income has increased a hundred fold from £120,000 to over £1.2m, with the profit being reinvested back into hospital catering.

Although using local ingredients has increased costs, Steve and Peter are concentrating on more efficient use of ingredients rather than cutting quality or local suppliers by using special offers from suppliers and developing new recipes using low cost ingredients. They continually attempt to attract more customers to the retail sites, introducing old fashioned hand-made sandwiches in the restaurant and a call order menu offering light meals, such as omelettes. The hospital is even looking at offering its own local pizza delivery service.

This drive for excellence is reflected in the prestigious Radio 4 Good Food Award which was awarded to the hospital and in numerous other plaudits for food quality, high standards of hygiene and the quality of staff training. Steve has also been awarded the MBE for his services to the NHS. But perhaps one of the best comments comes from

the Patient and Public Involvement in Health (PPIH) forum for the new Peterborough and Stamford hospital who made recommendations after visiting Bedford, including using fresh local ingredients where possible and developing a 'top class restaurant and coffee shop similar to those at Bedford'.