

Hospital Foodservice: Advantages of Room Service Style Systems

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INTRODUCTION

According to the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, “food and nutrition services departments play an important role [in health care organizations] in achieving facility goals pertaining to customer satisfaction, quality outcomes, cost containment, and revenue generation” (1). While foodservice departments in most health care facilities share similar goals, the approach they take to accomplish them can differ from facility to facility. One approach to foodservice that is gaining popularity in many hospitals is the room service model. The room service model has been shown to improve patient satisfaction and food quality, and decrease costs when compared to the traditional tray line service method. For these reasons, foodservice managers in healthcare facilities should be aware of the room service approach and how implementing a similar system would benefit their facility.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Patient Satisfaction

According to research findings, the quality of foodservice is correlated with overall patient satisfaction in hospitals (2). When it comes to patients’ perception of a meal, various different factors play a role in determining their level of satisfaction. Taste, variety, flavor, temperature of hot foods, and texture of meat and vegetables are all key variables that influence patient satisfaction (3). Aside from the characteristics of the food itself, the helpfulness of staff, the presentation of a meal, the perception of choosing a healthy meal, and the ability to choose the meal size also influence patient satisfaction (3). It is important to remember that the food is only one aspect of a patient’s overall experience during his or her stay in a hospital. Seemingly small things, such as the way in which employees interact with patients, also influences their

hospital experience and can have an impact on customer satisfaction (2). Foodservice managers should keep this in mind when hiring and training employees who will interact directly with patients.

Quality Outcomes

The quality outcome measures of hospital foodservice encompass more than just patient satisfaction. Patient food intake and the impact of nutrition on health and recovery are two very important measures of the quality of patient outcomes. While hospitalized, many patients have poor appetites and are inclined to eat very little. Taking action to improve patient intake has the potential to lead to improve outcomes by reducing the risk of malnutrition and thereby speeding recovery.

The traditional practice of having patients order their food a day in advance is flawed because by the time they receive their food, many patients no longer feel like eating what they ordered the day before. This is especially the case with cancer patients undergoing therapy. Cancer patients' treatments and side effects can vary from day to day, which influences their desire and ability to eat (4). Pediatric patients also tend to do better when they are allowed to call down to room service when they feel they are ready to eat. For both cancer and pediatric patients, the option of room service leads to increased meal consumption and improved patient meal satisfaction (5).

Cost Containment

One concern of many hospital foodservice managers is that a room service approach will increase labor costs because of the method of food delivery to patients. Additional staff is often needed to run the room service, and hospitals may have to add several full-time equivalents to their workforce to accommodate the change. Some hospitals have found creative ways to address

this issue. For example, the Lexington Medical Center in South Carolina, has found success in hiring high schoolers to help deliver patient meals (6). According to their director of nutrition services, Steve Howell, the most important factor in hiring teens is their personality and their ability to interact well with patients.

However in spite of the necessity for increased labor, studies have found that room service actually saves hospitals money in the long run by reducing food costs. Patients receive food trays less often, but they end up eating more of the food they receive. Because of this, there is a significant reduction in waste, which results in reductions in cost. Such studies have concluded that implementing room service is a strategy that can help hospitals reduce waste and overall costs” (4).

STRATEGIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Preliminary Planning and Design

Transitioning from a system of traditional hospital food service to using the room service method is not a simple process. A great deal of planning and communication are necessary for the implementation process to run smoothly. Such a change often requires adjustments to the menu, ordering process, meal production and delivery, and staffing (2). In some cases, adopting the room service approach requires additional changes, such as a new computer system or renovations to the kitchen in order to accommodate the new methods (7). These are factors that hospitals must consider before proceeding with their plans to implement room service in their facility.

A hospital should always consider the needs of its patients when designing a room service system that will work well in their facility. This is especially true when determining the

menu, which should be carefully planned to ensure that it is appropriate for the patients who will be served. The menu is the starting point that influences all other decisions, including the types of food and equipment, staffing levels, and kitchen design required (7). Therefore, it is essential that the menu be given adequate consideration and detailed planning early on in the transition process to a room service system.

Common Obstacles and Solutions

One obstacle faced by some hospitals when implementing room service is getting support from the nursing staff for the new process (8). Nurses aren't the only ones who have to be on board if the system is going to function smoothly; rather, the success of room service depends on the cooperation of the entire team of workers employed by the healthcare facility. A good practice that has enabled hospitals to minimize the issue of inadequate staff support is to use a multidisciplinary committee involving nursing staff, dietitians, patient service aides, infection control personnel, occupational health employees, patient representatives, and food services staff (7). By taking a multidisciplinary approach and including representative staff members, good communication is enhanced and support for the new processes is improved.

Studies have revealed several other practices are beneficial when implementing room service. These include allowing adequate time for the transition, providing customer service training, facilitating continuous communication, and adjusting the menu based on customer needs (8). Other practices observed to positively impact patient satisfaction included delivery staff wearing tailored uniforms and equipping carts with heated beverage stations (8).

Consultation with other hospitals who have working room service systems is also helpful because it provides insight and a standard for comparison when making the transition to room service (7).

Other challenges that hospitals could potentially encounter include language barriers, family members of patients ordering food for themselves, and delays in patient ordering due to physician diet-order changes (7). Each of these concerns, in addition to others which may arise, should be addressed by hospitals in ways that are suitable for their individual facility. Over time, hospitals have developed various strategies to deal with many of the common challenges of implementing room service.

CONCLUSION

The room service approach to serving patients is a trend that is continuing to grow among inpatient healthcare facilities. More hospitals are making the transition from traditional tray line service to a room service model and reaping the benefits. Room service helps increase patient satisfaction, improve quality outcomes, and reduce costs. Although implementing room service is not a simple process, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. Foodservice managers in hospitals that do not already have a room service system for patient food order and delivery should give serious consideration as to whether this type of model could be implemented in their facility.

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