

Fine dining in Bolton

The Royal Bolton Hospital (RBH) has spent the past few years 'fine-tuning' its catering service for patients and staff - and as a consequence has seen its reputation soar for serving good quality, healthy and wholesome hospital food.



The region's daily newspaper, the Bolton News, recently published an article about the 628-bed hospital's food service in which its reporter declared that she was "very impressed" with a patient meal that she sampled at the hospital.

Headlined 'Fine dining... at hospital!', the article was peppered with superlatives including 'delicious', 'scrumptious' and 'lovely' and it also featured glowing comments from customers who were interviewed while visiting the hospital's Minerva Restaurant and Café.

In 2010 the Royal Bolton Hospital Trust's Catering Manager, Margaret Meadows - who is a Member of the HCA North West Branch - won the Healthcare Award in the Cost Sector Catering Awards for her efforts to move catering services forward over the past five years. Her department also won the Catering category in the Health Business Awards 2010.

And three members of her team - Philip Hilton, Assistant Head Chef; Beverley Sharrocks, Assistant Catering Manager and Jean McNicholas, Catering Assistant - have also been recipients of HCA North West Branch awards.

Since joining the staff at the Royal Bolton Hospital in 2004, Margaret has been on a quest to change the negative perception that many people have about hospital food - and the newspaper coverage and accolades, as well as positive patient feedback, testify that her efforts are working.

Margaret and her team have liaised closely with medical and ward-level colleagues, as well as portering and estates staff, to trial various food service systems, processes and menus to enhance the hospital's traditional fresh cooked plated meal system.

Considerable effort has also been put into staff welfare and job satisfaction and according to Margaret this has

led to a change in the culture of the catering department and better relations with the healthcare teams who serve the meals on the ward.

"Our staff are so much happier with the improved processes," she explains. "We engaged everyone in the decision making processes and that has encouraged them to take ownership of the various tasks they work on.

"Sickness levels within the Catering department have dropped steadily from over 9 per cent six years ago down to 2.8 per cent last year."

Patients have also been consulted for their views on menus, meal content and other details relating to the meal service such as presentation and the type of crockery they prefer to use.

Margaret explains, "It's all about improving the patients' experience. We want to provide them with the best possible dining experience - good food served in a pleasant way to encourage them to eat well and to aid in their recovery.

"At the same time we want to support our colleagues at ward level by providing them with a meal service that is quick and easy to operate so that when the food reaches the patients the quality is as good as when it left the kitchen."

At the heart of the new service are 28 new Iseco Vitalis EVO single tray patient meal trolleys which are designed to transport a range of hot meals and cold dishes to the ward within one unit.

The trolleys - which can also be used with cook-chill and cook-freeze food services - were installed and commissioned last November and, according to Margaret, have been a huge success from day one.

Already they are showing a 25 per cent reduction in energy usage over the trolleys they have replaced.

The food belt, operated by six catering assistants and a diet chef per shift, has been adjusted to be as efficient as possible during the plating of the meals which are now served on china, rather than on plastic or metal crockery. And before each tray is loaded into the trolley a food production manager checks it for presentation and to ensure that each order is correct.

After being loaded from the plating belt, the trolleys are docked in a side bay containing a number of Iseco stand-fresh compressor units for a 20-minute boost period during which the hot shelves are heated by thermo-contact and the cold shelves are chilled.

Each trolley is then un-docked and transported to the wards by a newly introduced catering delivery team, with temperatures maintained for up to an hour without power connections and without the food drying out or deteriorating while in transit.

Margaret says, "My pet hate is luke warm food. We want every patient on the ward, including the last to be served, to receive their meal in the condition it left the kitchen and at exactly the right temperature, and the results we're getting from the new trolleys are excellent."

"Patients feel that the service is now far less institutionalised and that there is more of a homely feel to the way we now present the meals," she adds.

Margaret admits that the process of selecting a new food delivery system was a long but extremely worthwhile exercise and she's delighted with the outcome.

And so, it seems, are the patients. "One patient commented that the food was what they'd expect from a five star hotel. That says it all," she concludes.

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