



The New Normal in Hospital Patient Food Service.

Those “good old days” of hospital food as the brunt of jokes in the Sunday morning comics are disappearing and being replaced by news editorials praising the variety, quality and service of patient food now provided by many hospitals. Food, once prepared in bulk hours before service, doled onto plates and left in carts, only to arrive cold an hour later, has been replaced by restaurant style menus offering a variety ranging from a bahn mi sandwich with pickled coleslaw for lunch to marinated flank steak with roasted potatoes and broccoli for dinner. Helping to make this possible has been the advent of *Patient Room Service*. Yes, that service provided at a five star hotel has now arrived at a hospital near you. Patients order what they want, when they want to eat throughout the day and meals are delivered by a trained host, often in a professional waiter’s attire. While the patient diet order may limit some variety, changes in nutrition standards of care and reduced patient stays have allowed for greater flexibility than existed just ten years ago.

These innovations, starting at the grass roots level more than a decade ago, are now the best practice operating standards throughout the country. A central hospital telephone number, such as “4food” is typically used; however, advances in wireless technology now allow for bedside ordering in real time. These changes have shifted some control, in an environment typically foreign and of high stress, back to the patient and their family.

The positive impact of *Room Service* extends behind the scenes as well with significant changes for the staff and kitchen that prepare the meals. Hospital kitchens or Institutional kitchens have been designed the same way for decades. Large cooking kettles, mixers and refrigerators were designed to hold and produce food in large quantities. The trayline operated three times a day to assemble patient trays for delivery in large stainless steel carts, patient floor by patient floor. While advances in cooking equipment have improved kitchen operations, the advent of Room Service has required an upheaval of the traditional kitchen, starting with the removal of the trayline. The large kettles and mixers have been replaced with broilers, wok cookers and deli sandwich stations. Patient tray delivery carts, once equipped to hold 24 patient trays have been replaced with carts for 6-12 trays. In addition to providing better quality food more efficiently, the opportunity to significantly reduce equipment and build-out cost as well as recurring costs (repairs and maintenance, utilities, etc.) has increased due to this change in equipment needs.

The number one objective of *Room Service* in the hospital setting is to provide exceptional food and service to patients. Improved food and service will result in having a patient eat better which will in turn accelerate the healing process.

A close second would be the reduction of food service operating costs, achieved through waste reduction and eliminating redundancy in the traditional style of service. Both are accomplished by allowing the patient to order the food they want to eat when they are hungry verses at a set time determined by the hospital. Mary can now order scrambled eggs with rye toast for dinner or have a bowl of soup when she returns from physical therapy at 3pm. Instead of sending thirty trays to the ED on a daily basis or stocking a floor stock pantry with a multitude of items that tend to disappear, food items may be provided to the exact end user as needed. This shift in control has not been without challenges for the other operating departments in the hospital. Nursing and patients now collaborate to balance clinical care with nutritional care. Food Service Department staffing and mix also have changed to accommodate patient request throughout the day. Additionally, the cooks who previously prepared food in large quantities now must function like a restaurant short order cook who manages multiple food orders at a time.

The proof is in the pudding! Fortunately, most hospitals use large companies such as Press Ganey to measure patient satisfaction. The impact of Room Service has, without question, improved the patients' perception and overall satisfaction with hospital food service. Many hospital CEO's claim a "halo" effect as improved satisfaction with food service has improved satisfaction with overall hospital performance.