Introducing Volunteer Mealtime Assistants for older inpatients across University Hospital Southampton

Poor nutrition in hospital inpatients is a problem that is becoming increasingly recognised both in the UK and worldwide, and requires a multifaceted approach, including protected meal times, red trays and protein and energy supplementation as required.

One factor that particularly affects older inpatients is the amount of assistance they receive at mealtimes. Time-pressured nursing staff may not have the time they need to help patients with their meals.

In 2011, volunteers were recruited and trained to act as mealtime assistants at lunchtimes on one Medicine for Older People ward at University Hospital Southampton. They helped prepare patients for their meal, opened food packaging, encouraged and physically fed patients as needed. Over the course of one year, 29 volunteers assisted inpatients on 3,911 occasions, and the mealtime assistants were highly valued by patients, relatives and nursing staff. Volunteers have continued to work on the ward and are well established members of the team.

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We will be interviewing patients and relatives, nursing staff and volunteers to capture their experiences of mealtime assistance. We will also be recording food choice and measuring the amount of food patients eat before and after the introduction of the mealtime assistants in each department. At the end of the study, we hope to be able to describe the process of successfully establishing a team of mealtime assistants in these different departments as a blueprint for other hospitals.