

Royal Brompton – food is a vital part of recovery

The catering team, under manager Mike Duckett, has been changing the face of NHS food for more than 5 years, believing that patients deserve good, nutritious food to make their stay in hospital pleasant and to aid their recovery. Mike has featured on television and in national newspapers. He also hosted a seminar with Prince Charles and the Soil Association in 2008, which aimed to encourage NHS trusts to source more local and sustainable food. Mike has even been awarded an MBE in the Queens' Birthday Honours List for services to the NHS – and is well known as a champion of local, sustainable food. Nutrition and quality, rather than driving down costs, are at the heart of the hospital's catering provision.

The hospital caters for 295 beds and 1,753 staff, cooking all food on the premises from fresh ingredients, including a halal option on every menu. The catering team also cook from scratch for patients with special diets, rather than using ready meals and have even been known to visit the local supermarket to pick up special requests for patients.

Mike Duckett is passionate about quality – and it was the poor quality of the vegetables from the large scale supplier that made him look for alternative sources. Seasonal fruit and vegetables now come from Bank Farm in Ashford, Kent, which not only grow their own produce but act as a hub for other local farmers, helping to meet the hospital's needs for a large volume of vegetables. The farmers worked with the hospital to develop seasonal menus to make best use of local produce, including making soups on-site with locally grown organic produce – and soup consumption is now up by 40%.

The hospital now buys a wide range of products from local suppliers, for example free range eggs are from Kent, bread from Kilburn in North London and mushrooms are grown under the North Circular Road. Meat is sourced from Middlesex Meats, who source locally wherever possible and always check with the hospital if nothing local is available. Cooked meats such as bacon and sausages come from Woburn Country Farms who only source meat from Bedfordshire farmers. The hospital tries to use organic and fair trade products as much as possible, including organic meat on the menu at least once a week. Organic milk and yoghurts come from Windmill Farm in Bedford organic milk is used for all cakes and puddings, prepared by the hospital's own pastry chef. The hospital only serves Rainforest Alliance coffee for patients and in the restaurants. The hospital takes healthy eating seriously – providing healthier versions of popular dishes – for example low-fat burgers, meals balls and 100% chicken-meat nuggets. The catering team also started to make their own sandwiches for patients and have a very successful sandwich bar using home-made fillings. The hospital encourages staff to eat more healthily by using staff discounts to undercut local sandwich shops and also encourage people to have a proper meal by offering takeaway boxes at every meal. Healthy options are also provided at the sandwich bars and in all the vending machines and free cooled (not bottled) water is available in the restaurants.

The catering budget is higher than the national average – at £3.74 per adult patient per day but this wasn't due to the switch to smaller more local suppliers. Whilst some organic foods were more expensive, Mike found that local suppliers tend to have fewer overheads and often are much cheaper - so the overall effect of the changes were cost neutral. Just as important was the fact that local suppliers are also more flexible and willing to work with the hospital to find alternative local produce than major national companies.

The hospital places great importance on staff skills – with all catering staff undertaking NVQ training at Lewisham not only in catering skills but also in dealing with customers. Staff retention is very high – and agency staff often ask to come back again because they enjoy working at the hospital. The whole catering team is enthusiastic about food, healthy eating and providing a good service to customers – and share their expertise whenever possible. Mike regularly speaks at conferences on improving hospital food and a number of other NHS trusts have visited to see what measures they can take back to their own hospitals. The hospital has even been visited by an overseas team – a North Carolina hospital recently reported more than 40% improvement in patient satisfaction rates when it started to use some of the ideas from the Royal Brompton.