

Understanding Consumers' Perspectives of Food Service Systems in Mental Health Inpatient Units

Affiliations:

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Kurna people and we pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.



Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

We celebrate the strength and resilience of people with lived experience and value their important contributions to mental health services.



Background: *What we know (and what we don't)*

Current hospital food systems are often designed for medical wards and may not meet the unique needs of people with acute mental illness.

Consumers face increased nutritional risk due to:

- **Mental illness symptoms:** appetite changes, food refusal, disordered eating.
- **Medication side effects:** weight gain, metabolic changes, altered appetite or taste.

Evidence (Porter & Collins, 2022) shows nutritional targets are often unmet in this population.

Opportunity: Mental health inpatient food services can positively influence wellbeing by modelling and supporting healthy eating — if systems are accessible and tailored.

Key question:

How do consumers perceive the food service system and its role in supporting nutrition during admission?



Aims & Objective:

The Question/s that we set out to answer

Evaluate whether the current food service model meets consumer needs

Support improvement in consumers' physical health

Engage key stakeholders:

- Consumers
- Food service staff
- Health professionals

Understand stakeholder experiences

Inform future recommendations for service improvement

Methodology:

Where did the data come from?

Qualitative analysis of fieldnotes from dietitian–consumer interactions during admission

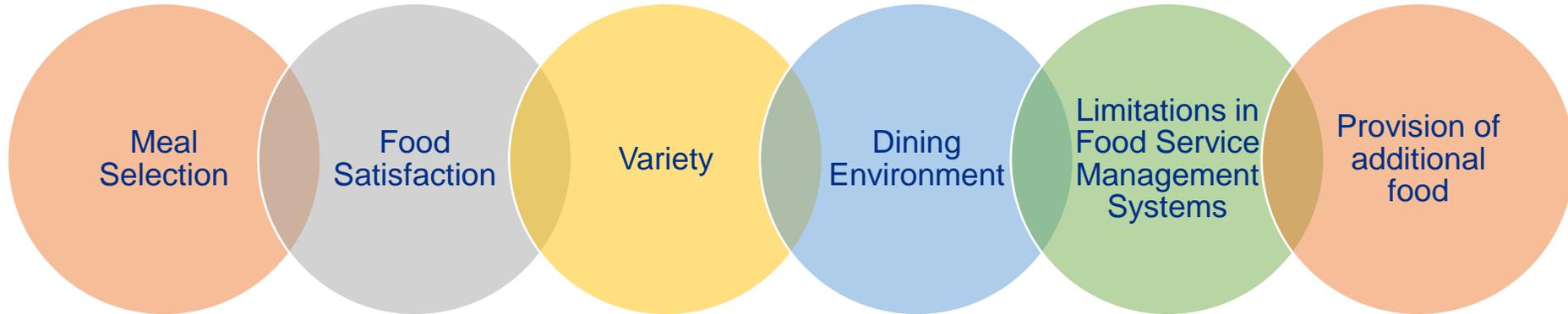
Data drawn from:

- Individual consultations
- Community group discussions
- Consumer experiences of food and food service explored as part of routine assessment
- Additional feedback collected from:
 - Food service staff
 - Health professionals (e.g. nursing staff)



Results: *What did we find?*

6 Key Themes were identified:



Discussion: *Connecting the dots!*

1. Autonomy, Choice, and Behavior Modeling

- **Valuing Choice:** Offering **meal choice** supports **patient autonomy**, a core principle in mental health recovery.
- **Behavioral Practice:** The food service is a **practical environment** to **model and practice healthy food behaviors**.

2. Addressing the Physical Health Gap

- **Nutritional Intervention:** **Variety** and accommodating **individual dietary preferences** (medical, cultural, ethical) are critical for meeting **diverse nutritional needs** and mitigating physical health risks.
- **Holistic Health:** Aligning food service with patient needs reinforces that **physical health is integral to mental recovery**.
- **Access and Stability:** **Access to supplementary food** addresses low appetite or increased needs, supporting optimal nutrition and helping to **model regular, structured eating**.

Discussion: *Connecting the dots!*

3. Therapeutic Environment and Outcomes

- **Flexibility and Engagement:** A **flexible dining environment** reduces stigma and encourages **social engagement**, which improves **oral intake** and patient satisfaction.
- **Client-Centered Design:** **Co-designing food service** with consumers and using their **feedback** is crucial. This directly improves **therapeutic outcomes** by consistently meeting basic physical needs to support comprehensive recovery.

Conclusion:

Key Themes Identified: Food satisfaction, meal selection, dining environment, additional food, variety, and dietary preferences

- **Tailored food systems** can **enhance satisfaction** and **support recovery**
- **Co-design with consumers** is essential to ensure responsiveness to diverse needs
- Improved food services can promote both **nutritional health** and **mental wellbeing**

Next Steps – *Improving Food Service Systems*

Share findings with key stakeholders

Use findings to guide future research and service improvements

Explore strategies to:

- Increase menu completion (menu monitors, delivery methods)
- Model positive food environments, behaviours and attitudes

Repeat menu completion audits and meal satisfaction audits

Longer term vision- Enhance food quality and sustainability

Align with **Equally Well Framework** and **NSW Nutrient Goal Standards**



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2. McCray, S., Maunder, K., Krikowa, R., & MacKenzie-Shalders, K. (2018). Room Service Improves Nutritional Intake and Increases Patient Satisfaction While Decreasing Food Waste and Cost. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 118(2), 284–293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2017.05.014>
3. Nutrition and quality food standards for adults in Victorian public hospitals and residential aged care services (2019)
4. Nutrient Goal Standard for Adult Patients (Nutrient Goal Standard for adult patients | Nutrition Standards | Agency for Clinical Innovation)