



Help or hindrance? Harnessing the resource of volunteers and visitors at hospital mealtimes

Ella Ottrey^{1,2}, Claire Palermo¹, Catherine E. Huggins¹, Judi Porter^{1,3}

1 Monash University, Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food, ella.ottrey@monash.edu

2 Eastern Health, Dietetics Department

3 Eastern Health, Allied Health Clinical Research Office

Background

Assisting and encouraging patients at mealtimes can enhance their food intake and eating experience in hospital. Staff involvement at mealtimes can be limited by time pressures and availability.

Volunteers and visitors provide mealtime assistance, however their relationship with staff is poorly understood. Guidance on how to harness the resource of volunteers and visitors at mealtimes is needed.

Aim

This study explored multiple perspectives and experiences of volunteer and visitor involvement and interactions at hospital mealtimes.

Additionally, it sought to understand how the volunteer and visitor role at mealtimes is perceived within the hospital system.



Methods

A qualitative, ethnographic approach was adopted.

Participants were more than 150 staff, volunteers and visitors on two hospital wards in Melbourne.



Inductive and thematic data analysis was undertaken.

Results

Volunteers and visitors were considered assets when they helped patients with their meals and supported their wellbeing, and aided staff-patient communication.

Visitors were seen to detract from patient care when they inhibited patient progress and impacted staff work practices.

Important considerations for volunteer and visitor involvement at mealtimes included visiting hours, visitor engagement in patient therapy and communication with staff.

Significance of the findings to allied health

The value of volunteers and visitors at mealtimes is contingent on their understanding of patients' therapeutic goals and ability to promote positive eating experiences.

Visitors may benefit from training before engaging in mealtime assistance.

Strategies should focus on promoting effective working with the healthcare team to strengthen volunteer and visitor contributions to patient care.

Funding. Ella Ottrey is supported by National Health and Medical Research Council and Monash University postgraduate scholarships

Citation. Ottrey, Palermo, Huggins & Porter (2018) *J Clin Nurs* 27(7-8):e1571-79
DOI: 10.1111/jocn.14318