

Avera Heart Hospital’s food program: healthy on the inside *and* out

In the warm and inviting cafeteria at 55-bed Avera Heart Hospital, a new facility opened in 2001 sprouting out of the plains on the outskirts of Sioux Falls, SD, employees spoon home-made yogurt out of serving trays and munch on warm granola bars that started out the night before from large brown paper bags of fresh oatmeal.

And soon at the cafeteria, employees will be encouraged to buy beverages in reusable mugs instead of Styrofoam cups and eat with real silverware instead of disposable utensils.

Spend a few days in the hospital kitchen, and you’ll probably see delivery trucks from local vendors pull up on the rear loading dock delivering large sacks of flaxseed, oats and other whole foods. But you won’t find any deep fryers in the back; many meals are now stir-fried on skillets.

Growing up on a small farm in rural South Dakota, Food and Nutrition Services Director Joanne Shearer knows a little bit

about home-cooked meals. “I fondly remember as a young girl drinking milk straight from the cow and playing outdoors all day long,” said Shearer, a graduate degreed registered dietitian and certified expert in diabetes education. “I remember mom making us take cod liver oil. It tasted terrible, but it was full of nutrients.”

Indeed, wonderful home-cooked meals aren’t the only thing Joanne Shearer has started from scratch at Avera Heart Hospital. Today, she oversees an award-winning heart healthy food program and has embarked on a series of environmentally friendly foodservice initiatives. Shearer said she is quickly learning how serving healthy foods and saving the environment go hand in hand. “Making a conscious decision to use less unnecessary packaging and more reusable things is actually a very easy leap of faith,” she said. “Besides, a well-prepared home-cooked meal is so much more enjoyable when it’s served on a real plate with real silverware.”

Heart healthy choices

For Shearer, it’s inconceivable that a hospital known for cardiac care excellence (consistently in the top 5 percent of all U.S. hospitals for overall cardiac services) would even dream of serving processed foods chock full of trans fats. Out are such items as processed carbohydrates, trans fats such as margarine and fried foods, polyunsaturated fats such as vegetable oils, pretzels, rice cakes and bagels. In are such things as beans, lentils and vegetables, foods high in fiber and dense in nutrients such as Omega 3



(flaxseed, fatty fish and fish oils), mono-saturated fats such as olive and canola oil, nuts, seeds, oatmeal and granola. Out are most of the processed carbohydrates such as white bread, white rice, white pasta and cream of wheat and in are whole nutrient dense foods such as whole grain breads and pasta, brown rice, thick rolled oats, ground flaxseed, beans and lentils. Olive oil and canola oil high in healthy monounsaturated fats also have replaced trans fat-laced grill and fry oils.



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Consider some of the following entrees on the hospital’s menu, which Shearer dubs “prairie Mediterranean”:

- Cranberry Carrot Cake made with flaxseed and walnuts, a desert crafted by Avera’s award-winning bakery chef, Mary Griffin;
- “Make over favorites” such as whole wheat pita pizza, turkey Ruebens and whole wheat pastas;
- Whole grain breads (the hospital typically buys 30 loaves of whole wheat and whole grain to one loaf white);
- Brown rice and brown rice salads;
- Barley mushroom pilaf (also used to stuff red peppers);
- Quinoa, a South American grain whose edible seeds and leaves are rich in amino acids; and
- Taboulleh, a heart healthy Arabic salad dish composed of finely chopped parsley, mint, tomato, scallion (spring onion), and other herbs with lemon juice, olive oil and various seasonings.

Green efforts

One major dividend in Shearer’s ongoing quest to offer menu choices that are healthy and natural also happens to be quite environmentally sound: buying in bulk.

When the hospital switched to buying grains, nuts and baking mixes, Shearer was delighted when the first large brown paper sacks came off the truck. “They came in these 25-50-pound bags and the only way to identify what was inside was someone had handwritten the contents on the outside with magic marker,” she recalls. “And I said to myself, ‘Well that makes sense!’ It made me realize how wasteful we’ve been buying stuff with all that fancy, colorful, needless packaging. I thought that was so cool.

“In recent years, foodservice across many industries has tended to go the opposite direction toward more packaging and pre-packaged prepared food products,” she added. “I guess one way to cut down on a lot of packaging is to offer more home prepared foods.

Even with this approach, I'm still amazed at the amount of cardboard and packaging we remove from our little place here."

Shearer also is in the midst of evaluating a plan to decrease her hospital's reliance on disposables like Styrofoam and plastic utensils. While foam cups may never be completely eliminated, employees would be provided with reusable mugs, or could use their own. Shearer said Jenette Merrill RD, Avera Heart Hospital's food buyer, is working with the hospital's purchasing department to find a suitable plastic mug that employees can use for purchasing fountain drinks for a discount. The hospital also is considering an option of using bio-based disposable cups. "Our goal is to significantly reduce Styrofoam cups as we now purchase 5,000 cups per month for our 55-bed hospital," Shearer said. "We researched this on various environmental web sites and also checked with our local health departments, and found it to be sound, since our drink dispensers don't ever touch the cups anyway."

Another major environmental initiative underway is a possible plan to stop using disposable dishes and utensils. Shearer said she was initially concerned about infection control and other issues. "I was concerned that washing dishes and utensils could consume more natural resources like heat and water, require more labor and capital equipment in terms of cleaning, the costs of acquiring and replacing broken items, and the impact of cleaning chemicals," she said. "I also considered the impact things like plastics and foam have on our environment."



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After participating in several online discussions with her peers, she initially concluded that switching from disposables to reusable dietary items was a wash – both environmentally and financially.

Delving deeper, Shearer read numerous studies and researched web sites such as Health Care Without Harm. To her delight, she found that it's actually more cost and effective and environmentally friendly to switch to reusables. "I found that *fewer* resources are consumed with reusables than disposables, and there are significant cost savings as well," she said.

Marketing the message

Successful projects like those Shearer has embarked upon call for an ability to change the hearts and minds of staff, administrators, and customers – a skill Shearer has mastered.

All new hires for the patient care unit are required to attend a four-hour class in nutrition, and employees from any department may participate. Initially, foodservice employees were provided 20 hours of nutrition and diet education followed up with eight hours of continuing education a year. In addition to establishing an employee wellness committee, Shearer meets regularly with clinicians in the hospital to enlist champions and spread the good word about nutrition, as well as the exciting things she's doing in foodservice.

But nothing compares to changing the mindset of her boss, Jon Soderholm, the hospital's president. When the National Society for Healthcare Foodservice Management held a web seminar in January 2008 called "So You Want to be Green, What Does that Mean?" Shearer invited Soderholm, the chief financial officer and purchasing director to attend. "They were interested in green initiatives and that's why I invited them to attend," she said. "It was already in their hearts and minds that they wanted to go this direction, so it was an easy sell."

"Boy did *that* get some great discussion going," she recalls, "and it has really sparked some good things." Out of those discussions Shearer proposed an idea: require all hospital managers to conceive and implement at least one green, eco-friendly process in their department each year, and make the plan part of their department goals. "I thought this would be a great way to get people working toward environmental initiatives, and if you actually rewarded people for thinking and acting that way, we'd be more successful than we already were," she said. The plan is currently under review.

The idea was a home run, and was recently approved by the hospital's president.

Indeed, Shearer's proposal is indicative of the way she looks at being a change agent in her job – one day, one idea at a time. "I've decided that the best approach is taking baby steps," she said. "One little victory or one little project at a time."

Through it all, Shearer has learned how to skillfully market change and ideas with staff and customers. She looks at her cafeteria, in fact, as a classroom where better nutrition is learned not through a book but on a plate. So far, it's working quite well.

"You shouldn't count on people to demand healthy food, but you can make their decision to ask for it a little easier," she said. This means not putting red heart labels on wholesome foods; for some, this may imply it doesn't taste as good as the less healthy alternative. It also means never combining favorite grilled items with wholesome entrees. Shearer also has employed visual marketing techniques – some subtle and some not-do-subtle. Menus are rife with nutrition information, and make use of carefully selected words such as "fresh," "natural," "lite," "lean," and "flavorful."

It's no easy task being in charge of a hospital cafeteria in a region of the country whose inhabitants are known for their love of such comfort foods as steak and fries. Shearer has skillfully tweaked her menus to still give people those foods by offering grilled instead of fried meats, mashing and roasting potatoes, and using 90 percent lean ground beef.

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Premier Foodservice program boosts awareness, choices

Many foodservice directors like Shearer find that switching to healthier, more environmentally friendly food choices are easier decisions when cost and availability aren't an issue.



For example, when she was buying antibiotic and hormone-free ground beef from a local butcher, Shearer had to drive to the shop to pick up the meat because the company didn't deliver. One day, she arrived at the store only to find that the butcher hadn't reported to work. Several weeks later, the company moved to a distant location that made it impractical for Shearer to pick up the product. When she found another local organic meats provider, she was told they couldn't sell her the quantity of product she needed because they wouldn't have enough product for their retail customers.

"I guess it's difficult on the supply end, but these are the kinds of issues you sometimes encounter with locally produced food," she said.

In the past, it was not uncommon for healthier food to be considerably more expensive because there were fewer companies making it. "The foodservice business has always been very price-driven," she said. "Foodservice directors are under so much pressure to reduce costs, and price often trumps a lot of other issues. But just getting everyone to change their perspective is half the battle. Trying to find the right product can sometimes be a challenge because many wholesalers haven't carried a lot of this stuff."

Many of these obstacles are no longer an issue thanks to the Premier Foodservice program.

"Given that most foodservice operators face daunting fiscal expectations, looking for ways to balance the bottom line with access to healthier choice items has been challenging," said Debby Kasper, RD, LD, manager of clinical nutrition for the Premier Foodservice program. "But I think Avera's success is testament to the tremendous progress we've made in not only raising the level of awareness about healthy foods, but also in broadening the healthy food choices our members now have."

While healthier food can sometimes cost more, Shearer said most customers understand. “Many people would be surprised to learn that sometimes it’s not that much more expensive,” she said. “If you’re going to buy and prepare healthy food, it’s amazing how your customers might be willing to pay a little more than you think to eat better and lessen the environmental impact.”

Indeed, a recent survey of community and academic hospitals by the Premier Foodservice program bears this out.

When asked if they would consider buying organically grown foods even if it meant higher prices of up to 10 percent, more than half said they would “probably” or “definitely” do so.

Shearer said things are improving on the supply side with most of her vendors now. In recent years, Shearer has been pleased by the significant increase of healthy food offerings and options with the Premier Foodservice group buying program, through which Avera participates. “At one time we were struggling to get healthy foods through our local vendors, but that’s changing a lot now,” she said. Shearer said she has been particularly pleased with the positive steps the Premier Foodservice program has made to raise ecological awareness, and seek contracts with companies that are switching packaging to more renewable, bio-based materials.