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Shock horror! Volunteer amateurs administer medication!

David Handley

Relax, this piece is about volunteers feeding patients acknowledging that food is medicine and a vital part of recovery.

Most hospitals encourage friends and relatives to feed patients who require such help. This takes the strain off other ward staff. Best friends and relatives are not always to hand, thus the value of volunteer meal time assistants known sometimes as 'feeding buddies'. My experience, over several years, is on an orthopaedic ward where patients are often elderly, sometimes confused after a fall or break and involving one or another of the limbs.

The problem is this; appetite gone, appetite reduced or no inclination to eat the food ordered earlier, or infirm limbs where help is essential. Sometimes there is a real antipathy to hospital food which can but only occasional lead to a stand-off. This is where the volunteer feeding buddy has a crucial role to play. This is where experience and time can pay off. Always tell the patient your name and use theirs.

The first positive contribution is someone taking a personal interest in the patient AND having all the time necessary to encourage, urge or seduce the patient into trying a little of the meal. The relaxed 1 to 1 approach pays off more often than not. That someone cares seems to be the central bit of psychology as is the regular appearance of the feeder. The nursing staff appreciate this too.

Some training is advisable. Some hospitals offer this starting with the importance of a warm introduction of feeder to patient. There is a need also to assess the best form of help to be offered. There are a multitude of small

but vital tasks to be judged and carried out. Does the food need cutting up, for the patient to manage themselves? If feeding judge carefully the pace at which the patient can manage...don't hurry! Offer a drink at appropriate intervals. Ask if the patient has had enough and if so wipe their mouth with a moist tissue.....all this is much appreciated. Always ask if there is anything else which is required. Sometimes what has been eaten needs to be recorded.

Sometimes not eating is due to infirmity and sometimes indifference and a judgement needs to be made. As with most things in life personal attention bears fruit. If the patient declares the food to be 'rubbish' always promise to report their sentiment to the cook, but if they declare that it was 'lovely' say you made it especially for them earlier today!

I often say to patients that they will be brimming with energy very soon after the dessert and that the fun run meets at the ward entrance mid-afternoon..... it never ceases to amuse. Though nutrition is the sole purpose of the exercise, raising spirits comes a close second and when combined are important contributors to recovery.

And always smile. It is worth every moment of your time.

Your contribution in this area is sorely needed in most/all hospitals. Do enquire at the Voluntary Services Dept.

David Handley
Feeding buddy twice a week at a Yorkshire hospital