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A survey of views of staff at a hospice on nutritional issues within palliative care

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Members of staff from a range of departments within Princess Alice Hospice undertook to establish a Nutritional Steering Group to look at issues related to nutritional care. Before deciding on which aspects of nutritional care to focus on first, it was decided to determine the views and main concerns of staff involved with this aspect of patient care.

A brief survey was devised that identified ten aspects of nutritional care, and staff were asked to grade the importance of each aspect. The questionnaire was sent to colleagues from the housekeeping and catering departments, nurses from the ward, the Day Hospice and the Community Palliative Care Team, occupational therapists (OT) and physiotherapists (PT), doctors and members of the Education and Research Department of the Hospice.

In total 138 questionnaires were sent out, of which sixty-two (45%) were returned:

Housekeeping	Catering	Ward (W)	Community Team (CT)	OT and PT	Medical Team (M)	Day Hospice	Education and Research (E)
2	2	21	23	5	3	3	3

The following answers were received:

Issues related to nutritional care	Not important	Important, but not a priority	Very important, top priority
That staff have more time to help patients with their food	1 (E)	23	37
Having protected meal times for patients	1 (E)	16	45
That patients have food available at all times	2 (CT)	22	38
Developing good communication between all departments involved with the delivery of nutritional care		19	42
Improving the quality of advice and support given to patients and carers on nutritional issues	1 (CT)	34	26
Providing patients and carers with dietary advice leaflets	9 (W, CT, E)	35	17
Assessing patients with a structured nutritional assessment tool	8 (W, CT, E)	35	17
That the hospice has a nutritional policy	5 (CT, M)	32	23
That the hospice has formal links with a dietitian with palliative care experience	2 (W, CT)	22	39
That staff attend study days or educational programmes to develop knowledge and skills in nutritional care	1 (W)	34	27

Staff were also asked to give a free text answer to the following question: ‘What one thing could we do to improve the nutritional care of our patients?’. The replies focused mainly on catering issues, feeding of patients, need for more training and education of staff and carers, the anxieties of staff that nutritional assessment may cause stress to patients and the need for a survey of patients and carers.

The views of staff on nutritional issues within the hospice differ widely. The work of the Nutrition Steering Group will have to focus not only on the key nutritional issues that affect palliative care patients, but also on helping colleagues increase their understanding of these issues.