

A larger serving of greens

Hospitals seek a food supply healthier for patients, the planet

Patients who dig into meals at 281-bed Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, Calif., may be surprised to learn that their fare not only features fresh, organic fruits and vegetables, but also just-picked selections from the hospital's own garden.

"We have a 4,000-square-foot garden that grows everything from onions to carrots to beets to flowers that go right into our cafeteria," says Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, ecology program coordinator for Catholic Healthcare West, the 39-hospital system that owns Dominican. The garden, which produces 3,000 pounds of produce annually, is part of an environmentally friendly food program that CHW has been cultivating for 12 years.

The healthcare provider was an early adopter of food chain-related purchasing and waste-management practices that won't damage the environment. These days, however, the system has company. A growing number of hospitals are "greening" their food supply-chain purchasing practices in an effort to improve the health of

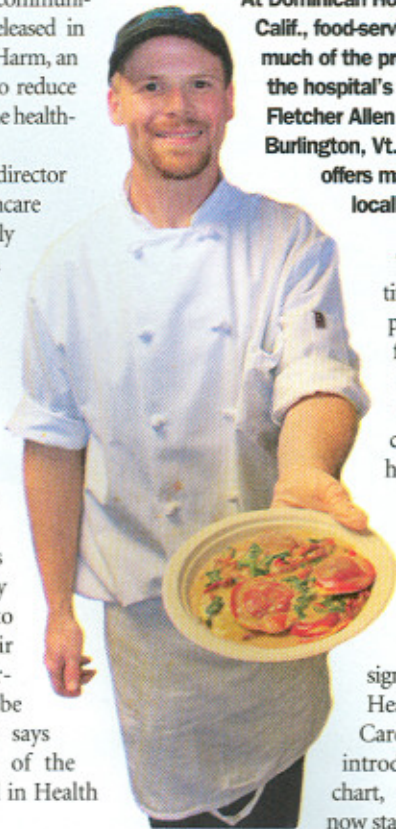


patients, employees and local communities, according to a survey released in May by Health Care Without Harm, an international group working to reduce the environmental impact of the health-care industry.

Gary Cohen, co-executive director of the organization, says healthcare providers are slowly but surely understanding that there is "a direct link between healthy food and healthy people," and that their traditional food-purchasing practices often support agricultural, distribution and waste-management practices that hurt the environment and, subsequently, human health.

The good news is hospitals also are realizing that they have the financial leverage to influence the practices of their suppliers. "With that purchasing power, you start to be able to shift that market," says Jamie Harvie, coordinator of the organization's Healthy Food in Health Care initiative.

At Dominican Hospital, Santa Cruz, Calif., food-service staff can find much of the produce they need in the hospital's own garden. At Fletcher Allen Health Care, Burlington, Vt., chef Kelly Allen, left, offers made-to-order fare using locally grown ingredients.



The survey findings, titled *Menu of Change*, provide an overview of food chain-related environmental and health-care issues and offer case studies of 12 U.S. hospitals working to green their food-supply chains. It also lists the names of the 122 hospitals that by the report's publication had signed the organization's Healthy Food in Health Care pledge, which was introduced in 2005 (See chart, p. 29). That number now stands at 128 providers.

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In an exclusive interview, *Modern Healthcare* reporter Shawn Rhea talks with Jamie Harvie, coordinator of the Healthy Food in Health Care program with the organization Health Care Without Harm, about ways to help improve the food supply chain, both environmentally and nutritionally. To listen to the interview please visit the Special Report Extra section of Modern Healthcare Online at modernhealthcare.com.

Among other directives, hospitals signing the pledge commit to adopting sustainable food-procurement practices that opt for hormone-free milk, fair-trade coffee and organic and locally sourced produce and meats. Participating providers also agree to work toward reducing their food-related carbon footprints by limiting the distance food travels to reach their facilities, thereby cutting down on fuel consumed, and buying biodegradable containers and recycling, thereby limiting the amount of plastic that ends up in landfills.

This issue is “a big interest to our hospitals,” says Bridget May, director of the food and nutrition program for group purchasing organization MedAssets. “A lot of it is driven by their mission and philosophy to be good stewards of the community.”

Diane Imrie, director of nutrition services at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington, Vt., says that recognition of a shared mission is precisely what drove her hospital to get onboard with Health Care Without Harm’s healthy foods pledge. “I felt it really summarized how we already were doing business and what we wanted to do” in the future, Imrie says. “We’d already done a lot of work in terms of improved nutrition, but this furthered us towards sustainable foods. Now, when we look at introducing changes to the system we ask if it’s in line with the pledge.”

Fletcher Allen uses the pledge mainly to guide food-related purchasing decisions, Imrie says. Last year, for example, the hospital decided to increase the amount of locally grown fruits, vegetables and beef products it purchases. Fletcher Allen joined the Vermont Fresh Network, an organization that promotes local farm products, and to ensure that the hospital would be able to purchase a certain percentage of its produce locally. It also invited in five area farmers to talk about what they planned to grow that year and what the hospital needed. On the strength of Fletcher Allen’s purchasing commitments, at least one of those farmers has plans to expand his storage facilities so that the hospital is able to access some locally grown produce during the fall and early winter months, Imrie says.

Fletcher Allen also switched to local vendor Wood Creek Farm for all of its ground-beef supplies. The meat is hormone-free and mostly grass-fed, although the farm does have to supplement with grain feed during winter months, Imrie says. (Meat from grass-fed animals has been shown to have higher levels of healthy omega-3 fatty acids than meat from corn- and soy-fed animals, according to a report from the American Public Health Association’s position

paper *Toward a Healthy, Sustainable Food System*.) The hospital also has reduced its seafood offerings from 20 to 12 different fish in order to reduce patient and employee exposure to toxins such as mercury, and to ensure the provider isn’t purchasing overfished species.

“We’re starting to see very positive patient comments like, ‘I was happy to see organic or local foods on the menu,’” Imrie says of reaction to the hospital’s efforts.

A balancing act

Maria Simmons, manager of patient food services for 324-bed Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago, says her hospital also has experi-

enced positive patient feedback on its efforts to green its food-supply chain. “What we’ve come to understand is, especially with the grass-fed beef, patients are able to pick up on the flavor immediately. I get notes like “tastes like meat should,” she says.

Such comments along with the knowledge that a greener food-supply chain can improve the

health of patients, employees and the surrounding community—have kept Swedish Covenant committed to its effort to a sustainable-food policy. But Simmons acknowledged the effort has challenged the hospital’s finances and supply-chain staff. “A lot of the (sustain-

able-food) vendors I met didn’t do institutional-sized products, and they weren’t distributed through any of our distributors,” she says. “Also, our distributors weren’t initially onboard with carrying those products. They said, ‘Who’s going to pay that premium price for those products?’”

Eventually, however, Simmons found a distributor called Goodness Greeness, which specializes in providing organic and sustainable foods to restaurants. She met with a representative, and together they were able to identify appropriate products for the hospital. Simmons also discovered that one of her distributors already had a relationship with the organic produce company Earthbound Farm, and though ordering those products requires a bit more lead time since the distributor doesn’t stock it, it has allowed her to more easily and affordably source organic products during off-season.

Cost is another concern hospitals face when endeavoring to green their food-supply chains. Simmons, for example, acknowledged that Swedish’s food expenses are roughly 5% to 10% higher, and Imrie says Fletcher Allen now spends about \$15,000 more a year to purchase 100% post-consumer recycled plates for the cafeteria.

Mark Branovan, director of hospitality for 267-bed St. Luke’s Hospital in Duluth, Minn., says his hospital has made significant headway in identifying affordable ways to green its food-



Imrie: Patients have been happy with the new menu choices.



Simmons: Hospitals are using their leverage with food suppliers.

TAKING THE PLEDGE

In partnering with Health Care Without Harm, hospitals agree to:

- 1. Increase their servings of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as minimally processed foods and reduce unhealthy fats and sugar.
- 2. Implement a sustainable-foods program, which includes steps such as offering hormone-free milk, fair-trade coffee and organic and locally grown produce.
- 3. Work with local farmers and community-based food suppliers.
- 4. Encourage vendors to adopt sustainable-food production and distribution practices.
- 5. Communicate their interest in bio-friendly food sourcing to their group purchasing organizations.
- 6. Develop an in-house, sustainable-foods sourcing program.
- 7. Educate employees, patients and local communities about sustainable-food practices.
- 8. Minimize food-related waste and use eco-friendly disposable food containers and utensils.
- 9. Report annually on their pledge progress.

Source: Health Care Without Harm

supply chain, but finding affordable biodegradable containers and implementing a recycling program has been more challenging. The provider recently switched back to plastic foam containers after seeing a huge increase in its costs for biodegradable to-go containers. "When we'd meet with our supplier, we'd see that that cost was a top item—around number two or three—and we said that it's just silly that in these financial times a hospital would be spending that much on to-go containers."

Likewise, Imrie says that until this year cost concerns prevented Fletcher Allen from instituting its plan to switch to antibiotic- and arsenic-free poultry. Antibiotics and arsenic are used to kill bacteria and parasites typical to industrial-raised poultry, but studies suggest the use of these additives in animal feed may be contributing to the creation of drug-resistant superbugs and putting humans at increased risk for toxin exposure and diabetes.

Getting creative

But providers have found creative ways to offset some of the costs of their greening efforts. MultiCare Health System, a three-hospital provider based in Tacoma, Wash., was able to turn its old cooking oil into a profit vehicle by locating a company that wanted to use the oil to produce bio-diesel fuel. "It used to cost us \$50 to \$60 a month to have it taken away. Now we

receive about \$25 to \$30," says Janice Raymond, director of nutrition services for the system.

Last year, Fletcher Allen was able to invest \$10,000 toward its locally grown, grass-fed beef purchases when the hospital realized a savings through a new distributor, and the hospital was able to recoup the additional \$39,000 it spent to purchase local grass-fed beef and organic yogurt by raising dining-room prices for these items. The provider saves 25 cents per pound by buying local butternut squash for a savings of more than \$1,600 annually on that single vegetable. The hospital also sees small savings on herbs by growing some in its on-site healing garden.

Raymond also expects MultiCare to save substantially on garbage costs by installing a food composter that will allow the kitchen to turn food scraps and employee and patient leftovers into environmentally friendly fertilizer.

While recycling and composting programs may sound like a sensible partial fix to the higher costs of a green food-supply chain, providers will have to rely on employee cooperation if the programs are to be environmentally and financially successful, supply-chain experts say. "If you just end up throwing the biodegradable products out instead of recycling them, then they lose their purpose," says Debby Kasper, manager of clinical nutrition for group purchasing organization Prentier.

Hospital supply-chain managers are realiz-

ing that they will have to depend on everyone—from the C-suite executive who has the power to approve purchasing changes to the orderly who grabs lunch in the dining room—doing their part if the greening movement is going to succeed.

Suppliers and purchasing groups are included in that equation. To that end, a number of GPOs say they are beginning to include questions and green-initiative requirements into their requests for proposals from vendors.

"As our new contracts go out to bid, our committees have been asking questions about vendors' environmental practices and using those answers to help decide who gets the contract," Kasper says. She notes that a recent coffee contract included awards to several fair-trade and Rainforest Alliance coffee producers because member hospitals were looking to purchase products that have positive effects on coffee-producing economies and the environment.

Suppliers such as the food-services company Unidine Corp., which specializes in hospital and senior services, are also greening their food-sourcing and preparation practices in response to their hospital clients' needs. In May, the Newton, Mass.-based company, which provides on-site management of hospital cafeterias and patient-food programs, became the first food-services company to sign Health Care Without Harm's Food Service Contractor Pledge.

"We position ourselves as a fresh-food company, so we said, 'If we're going to do that, we should do it all the way,'" says Chris Chronis, vice president of marketing for Unidine. The pledge requires Unidine to seek local fresh foods and to source meat, poultry and dairy products free of antibiotics and hormones. The company also pledged to support labeling of genetically engineered foods and to issue an annual report of steps it has taken to meet these goals.

One of Unidine's first efforts will be to eliminate trans-fats from all of its baked goods. Similar to hospitals, the supplier is learning that the task of greening its supply chain is no easy feat.

"It can be very daunting, because even though you don't process your foods using trans-fats, some products you use may already come with it," says Chronis, who noted the company is having to explore multiple layers of its food-chain to ensure its products will be free of trans-fats.

Health Care Without Harm's Harvie says that participation in the food supply-chain greening effort by companies such as Unidine is important when you consider 17% of hospitals contract out their kitchen services. "Those contractors can be roadblocks to improvement because they have a whole system that's based on industrial suppliers," he says. "They're operating on a model that has to change." <<



Executive chef Richard Jarmusz harvests herbs growing in Fletcher Allen's healing garden.