

Education the key to improved foodservices and menu planning

The function of foodservices

Foodservice is by no means an easy operation and understanding how it functions and getting the most out of all operations is really important to understand. For foodservices to function well, aged care facilities rely upon the foodservice industry to come up with food products and ingredients which will assist with the building of menus. It also requires that staff are trained and educated in menu planning to build menus which are enjoyed by residents but also meet their nutritional and social needs.

Function of menu planning

When we talk about menu planning it is not a simple process. Menu planning involves striking the right balance between foods and ingredients, menu cycle length, foods combination, presentation and portion control. It also requires a certain level of nutrition knowledge and how foods contribute to this. Understanding the food preferences, likes and dislikes of what residents would they would like added to menus. But one of the biggest challenges it to design a menu which meets the needs of the individual while catering for group of residents who needs are diverse, complex and at times requiring texture modification.

The role of the foodservice industry

The foodservice industry has a responsibility to provide foodservices in aged care facilities with not only information regarding its products, how these products can be utilised in planning better menus and to ensure they educationally supporting facilities.

When it comes to the food manufacturing companies their goal is to sell their product to aged care facilities and get them onto menus. But what is more important is to educate staff as to what the product does. How does the foodservice industry do this? In my experience the foodservice reps personally call to provide new product information. Other means are through email product information, electronic food journals, food trade shows or publications like this one produced by Church Resources. It is then up to the catering manager to communicate the information to other foodservice staff.

We now live in a fast pace world where food development is ever changing and food manufacturers are looking for novel solution to ensure market share. Diets have become more complex the need for texture modified food strategies and with the increases in dementia care and food intolerances being able to supply menu solutions to aged care facilities is important.

Menu planning for food intolerances and allergies

One of the changing areas in aged care is the increase need for products which will assist in menu planning to cater for residents with food intolerances and allergies. As I said before it is difficult to catering for groups of people and trying to get the right balance to meet the needs of the individuals When you have to cater for different types of food intolerances and food allergies, not utilising menu integration strategies will lead to increased production time to produce additional food to accommodate resident's needs. Poor menu integration also leads to reduce quality of the menu as residents are often not eating foods similar to other residents. For example residents having different meals or sauces as gluten free gravy mix is not used or residents who are dairy intolerant not having ice cream as soy ice cream is not purchased.

An example of menu integration

For example I was recently in a facility and some residents were dairy intolerant. The evening meal consisted of spinach and cheese triangle and the cheesy scrambled eggs made with milk. When it came time to plate up a meal for this food intolerance there was nothing prepared and the meal service was delayed as the menu had not provided an integration which would have provided a suitable alternative. What also was surprising that staff had very little knowledge of foods and other foods products which could have been heated up as a dairy free alternative.

So looking at the menu for that evening meal offering a dairy free sandwich could have been a cold alternative but what could have been done was scrambled eggs could have been made with soy milk and no cheese or an alternative hot choice of another type of pasty could have been scheduled onto the menu like vegetable pasties, sausage roll and party pies and spinach triangles moved to another part of the menu. Food manufacturers have certainly taken up the challenge to produce foods which are free from gluten, soy, dairy etc. so that they can be used all the time across the menu and when a resident with a food intolerance comes into the facility the menu is already able to provide suitable meals.

You are not going to be able to get total menu integration, some food will have to be made such as soy custard or purchase some different products from manufacturers. That's when the education provided by the foodservice industry is essential to assist facilities with food options which can be integrated into menu planning.

What should company representative know about aged care

Need to understand the foodservice environment and that environment in the unique aged care framework

Aged care services and the types of services in which age care provides

Understand menu planning processes in aged care

Basic understanding of nutrition and how their products provide nutrition and can be used to deliver this

Providing menu ideas and how products can be used in multiply ways with recipes and product information which provides practical information.

What do foodservice staff need to know

All staff should have a basic knowledge of nutrition and an overview of special dietary requirements needed by residents in aged care.

Understand how to menu plan as well as how to integrate diets and texture modifications.

Aged care is a complex environment and it is not easy to get thousands of meals correct every single day. Some of our residents are very frail and rely upon the menu as their sole source of nutrition. We owe it to them to make sure the menu is full of tasty food and meals. The food service industry plays a very important role supporting in both manufacturing and education to support facilities in the menu development process.

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