AN INNOVATIVE PROGRAM CHANGES FOODSERVICE PRACTICES AND BEST PRACTICE EXPECTATIONS IN AGED CARE FACILITY COOKS AND CHEFS

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Introduction

With Australia’s ageing population the number of residents in Aged Care Facilities (ACF) is projected to significantly increase. The diet of the residents is crucial to their health and to their quality of life. The Maggie Beer Foundation (MBF) aims to transform the food experience for residents by changing institutional food preparation practices and shifting best practice expectations by working with ACF foodservice staff. This study, undertaken by Nutrition and Dietetics Flinders University, evaluated the inaugural ‘Creating an Appetite for Life’ nutrition education program for ACF cooks and chefs for process and impact.

Method

Thirty management-level cooks and chefs from 26 ACF in Victoria (n=28) and Canberra (n=2) attended a three day, interactive nutrition education program in South Australia facilitated by Maggie Beer, Founder of the MBF, and other foodservice experts. Participants completed pre and post-program self-administered surveys and daily surveys and attended two focus groups during the program to evaluate process and immediate impact. A four month phone interview (n=27) and thematic analysis of the qualitative data assessed medium term impact on foodservice practices and attitudes.

Results

The process evaluation revealed that the program exceeded the expectations of the participants. They attributed the sessions to increasing their knowledge in how to meet resident’s nutritional needs, use new ingredients and change some preparation and cooking practices. The practical nature of the delivery of information through cooking and food was also credited to increases in knowledge.

Participants entered the program confident in their abilities (n=23/28 confident or very confident) and identified the most valuable parts of the program as the opportunity to network, share ideas, problem-solve with other motivated chefs and foodservice managers and learn from the MBF team.

Phone interviews four months later showed that;

- participation in the program had impacted on the menu, food practices, eating environments and working relationships of all ACF foodservices.
- all of the ACFs had incorporated new recipes and made changes to food preparation and provision practices. Three had introduced new menus.
- all of the ACFs had made changes to the physical dining environment and some had changed the timing of meals and the involvement and roles of food service staff.
- all ACFs were involving management and other staff more in decision-making and problem solving.
- residents had reacted positively to these changes.
- participants had formed an active community of practice, supporting each other regularly through social media and other means to sustain the motivation for continuous improvement.

Discussion

Participants reported feeling empowered through enhanced workplace learning and peer support post-program. Although participants started relatively confident and ready to make changes the program appeared to be the catalyst for enabling changes.

Participants highlighted the need for concurrent system changes to support the changes they initiated. The meal budget, food regulations, management support, inconsistencies with dietitians and staff attitudes were all identified as constraints. They also acknowledged the value of knowing more about the nutritional needs of residents and were unanimous that the partnership with nationally recognised experts and celebrities such as Maggie Beer was crucial in championing the cause and ‘giving them a voice’.

So what?

This cohort study found meaningful changes in cooks and chefs self-reported ability to act as change agents and influence local ACF food service practices. This innovative program is being repeated across Australia in the other states in 2016. The aim is to create a critical mass of ‘product champions’ and a national community of practice. In combination with other MBF strategies it is anticipated that Australia-wide changes will be achieved in ACF foodservices.

References