

## **Creating a Sustainable Hospital Café**

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"I pledge that I have neither given nor received any aid on this work."

Dr. Steven Becker

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I am a clinical laboratory scientist in a specialty diagnostic lab at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital (SNGH). In my role, I am required to look at patient's electronic medical records and report certain disease states to the pathologists. Some of the disease states that I see regularly are obesity, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and various cancers. At times, my department receives patient blood samples that are lipemic, which means it has a high fat content and the plasma has an abnormal milky appearance due to fat, as opposed to a normal clear, yellow appearance. I can't help but wonder if the patient's disease is linked to their dietary habits and if their treatment plan includes a recommended plant-based diet. SNGH is one of twelve hospitals within Sentara's healthcare system. Sentara's mission statement is simple, yet impactful, "We improve health every day." Sentara commits to that mission by doing the following:

- Always keep you safe
- Always treat you with dignity, respect, and compassion
- Always listen and respond to you
- Always keep you informed and involved
- Always work together as a team to provide you quality healthcare

SNGH employs thousands of employees that work around the clock providing care to patients in the surrounding communities. To uphold their commitment to the community, Sentara commits to their employees by providing competitive pay and benefits that includes medical insurance, paid annual leave to balance work and life, a tuition assistance program, a free vaccination program, and more. SNGH has a dining facility called the Retreat Café that provides food to fuel the bodies of the hospital workers, contractors, and visitors of SNGH. The Retreat Café is operated by Morrison Healthcare and provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily with limited items during off-peak dining hours. When you walk into the café there are several kiosks

for ordering made-to-order menu items. For those who are in a rush, there is a grab-and-go cooler full of pre-made salads, deli sandwiches, and sushi. Otherwise, one can select from the four different areas to get made-to-order food:

- The Deli – Soup, sides, sandwiches, grilled cheese
- Zen Pan-Asian Cuisine – Rice, veggie, protein, and sauce bowl
- Grill & Co – Beef and turkey burgers, chicken sandwiches, black bean burger and fried food sides
- The Italian Kitchen – pizza, stromboli, calzone, french fries and onion rings

In addition to the daily offerings at the different stations, there is a daily bulletin e-mailed to employees that includes a weekly café menu with specialty items such as loaded baked potatoes, creamy soups of the day, or tacos on Tuesdays. Prior to COVID-19, there was a large salad bar in the center of the café but has since been split into a display for fruits with skins (apples, oranges, and bananas), and packaged muffins and cakes. Nearing each cashier station is an abundance of processed packaged foods, such as power bars, and potato and veggie chips that are readily available as temptation while one waits in line to pay.

The current food offerings at the Retreat Café are not reflective of Sentara’s mission to “improve health every day”. Diets rich in meats, fat, and starchy carbohydrates are associated with greater risk for heart disease, type II diabetes, stroke, and some cancers. These are the non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that healthcare providers treat daily at SNGH and at the adjoining Sentara Heart Hospital (SHH). The implications of the current food choices extend beyond the disease states treated within the hospital walls. Unless meat and dairy products are sourced from local farms, the food comes from large, industrialized food production plants that include Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) that are known for contributing to

antibiotic resistance, threats of disease transmission through over-crowded facilities and contamination of vegetables through animal waste runoff spilling into nearby crops. The food industry is responsible for the production of 26% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (Ritchie & Roser, 2020). Meat productions, from its origin to finished product create the highest greenhouse gas emissions, while tofu, fruits, vegetables, and nuts have the least impact (Ritchie & Roser, 2020). Greenhouse gas emissions are drivers of climate change and increasing sea level rise which have direct and indirect negative impacts on health. Healthy, minimally processed, locally sourced (when possible) plant-based food options are not only important for human health, but are more sustainable for the planet.

I propose the following interventions that can be implemented as a system within the Retreat Café:

- Choice architecture
- Meatless Mondays
- Partnering with Mission: Health

Choice architecture is the strategic placement of food items with the intent to nudge individuals to select that choice. The design of the Retreat Café is ideal for the placement of healthy food items, such as fruits, vegetables, and minimally processed energy bars in areas where customers are likely to be “nudged”, for example, at the beginning and end of food lines. Currently, potato chips, Pop Tarts, and other unhealthy, processed snacks occupy this space. The implementation would be a simple trade from unhealthy items to healthy items in primary areas, leaving the unhealthy items in less desirable locations, farther away from areas where customers would likely be standing in line (Ensaff, 2021).

Meatless Monday is a program that has been implemented globally in a variety of settings, such as schools, hospitals, and neighborhood community programs. The message is simple: “Skip meat once a week.” While the concept of Meatless Monday originated during World War I as a food conservation program, it provided a strong foundation for a global solution to combat climate change and prevent, reduce, or reverse NCDs caused by poor diet and nutrition (The Benefits of Meatless Monday, 2020). The Meatless Monday campaign offers resources such as marketing materials, how-to guides, and evidence-based research on their website that anyone can access to create proposals for their workplace, school, or other organization to transition to Meatless Mondays (The Benefits of Meatless Monday, 2020). The implementation of Meatless Monday at the Retreat Café should cause little disruption, as the campaign provides plant-based recipes that Morrison Healthcare could utilize, and the weekly café menu publication allows employees to view their Meatless options prior to dining. The resource offerings through the Meatless Monday campaign website provide fun, educational posters that could be displayed throughout the Retreat Café, providing additional health and planet benefit facts to those dining at the café.

Mission: Health is a voluntary wellness program available to all Sentara employees. It provides a variety of services and resources to encourage employees to invest in their own health and live by Sentara’s mission “to improve health every day”. Some of the activities that are encouraged are completing an annual physical exam, receiving required/suggested vaccinations, and attending designated health-content webinars. In 2020, Sentara incentivized Mission: Health by offering a \$250 Visa prepaid gift card to employees who completed designated healthy tasks that translated into points earned towards an end goal. Mission: Health could add Meatless Monday participation to their approved healthy tasks list. The monitoring of this effort could be

done through a meal punch card that a cashier would be responsible for validating if the employee purchased a Meatless Monday menu item. Upon completion of 10 Meatless Monday card punches, the employee would receive a code that would correspond to a 50-point achievement toward the required points for the \$250 gift card.

Together, the three recommendations to shift towards more sustainable, plant-based food offerings at the Retreat Café encourages healthy food choices at work which can influence more healthy behavior throughout the week and at home. Consuming more minimally processed, plant-based foods is associated with lower incidence of heart disease, stroke, Type II diabetes, obesity, and some cancers (Dinu et al., 2017). The health impact extends beyond the hospital, into the local community and globally. The proposed local changes at SNGH create a ripple effect by demanding less meat and other energy intensive produced food products for more sustainable, locally sourced food. Implementing these recommendations at all Sentara hospitals has an even greater reach and impact on the health of communities and the planet.

Sentara Healthcare continues to strive to be a trusted healthcare service leader for all the communities it serves. Once implemented, publicizing this initiative could influence an increase of new patients and attract new employees to Sentara, a return benefit to Sentara.

## References

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