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MPH 784

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Reading Hospital Dietary Changes

My chosen occupation is being a Medical Laboratory Scientist at Reading Hospital – Tower Health located in Reading, PA. Reading Hospital is large in that it encompasses just over 700 in-patient beds, has the busiest emergency department in the state, is a level 1 trauma center, and has specialty services such as neonatal intensive care, heart and cancer centers, and is involved with the community. Due to this wide range of expertise, our hospital sees a variety of patients and their families, as well as offers diversity in the care providers we employ. I completed my clinical portion of my bachelor's degree at this institution in 2019 and was hired shortly after graduation. While I have always worked in the clinical laboratory, I have gained experience in different specialty departments and shift schedules. My current role is a Point of Care Coordinator supplemented with working in blood bank. I am based out of the lab which is where most of my work gets completed but I do get exposed to the direct patient care units. Our hospital has a large point of care system which means we have bedside devices employed in nearly every unit in the hospital. When they need updating, troubleshooting, or maintenance, I go to the floors to find the device. Through this, I am exposed to anesthesia/operating room, pediatrics, maternity, cardiovascular, intensive care units, cancer units, emergency department, trauma bays, and more areas of the hospital. I witness the different types of patients that can be found in these respective areas as well as the care they are receiving.

As in most hospitals, Reading Hospital has a large dietary team to keep our patients, visitors, and employees fed. From a patient perspective, it is my understanding that each patient receives a nutrition screening to determine what diet is best for the patient's recovery. From there, they are able to order room service tailored to their diagnosis based on suggestions made by a registered dietitian nutritionist. As a visitor or employee, there are 4 places available for food choices that are open during the day and only one during the night. The cafeteria has the most options for anyone. While there are ample choices for all diet types, there is not an emphasis on reducing meat consumption. I also do not believe there is a plan in place for leftover food, which creates a lot of unnecessary waste. While the hospital does not have any notable climate or environmental change plans, the city of Reading participates in the PA Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Local Climate Action Program. The city initiated various efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions such as more efficient street lights, trash pickup, etc. (PA Media, 2022). Reading partners with ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability to pursue more sustainable practices and identify climate damaging areas in their communities (PA Media, 2022). Reading Hospital also performs a community needs assessment where the hospital analyzes the surrounding community and identifies strengths and weaknesses within the realm of community health needs. An implementation plan is then issued to make improvements or adjustments to aid the community's overall health. For example, the hospital has initiated programs such as a bike share program, Berks Country trail challenge, free cancer screenings, street medicine, soft landing for expectant mothers, pathway programs for high school students, opioid use disorder centers, and community connection (screens patients for food insecurities, housing instability, lack of transportation,

safety, etc.) (Reading Hospital, 2022). These programs integrate the hospital with those most at need and aims to shorten the gap of social disparities and inequities. Reading Hospital continually looks for ways to make healthcare more accessible.

There is no longer room to deny that shifting to a plant-based diet would lessen the burden of disease on the community, the planet, and quite frankly an overwhelmed healthcare system nationwide. In order to reach the patient population, I think education as well as implementation strategies would work best. Offering more sustainable meal choices while they are admitted to the hospital may be a good idea, it likely will not become a repetitive practice in their lives. During a patient's recovery may not be the best time to introduce a new way of eating. Many patients may feel overwhelmed at shifting their diet to plant based as it may be very different from their current lifestyle. In order to lessen anxiety, it may be beneficial to have the dietary team at the hospital perform education segments to the patients and their families. Including the visitors in the education will provide a source of support for the patient, especially if they are not able to grocery shop or cook for themselves. Along with this education program, having well thought out recipes and weekly meal plan guidelines may help the patient put a plant-based diet into action. In the best-case scenario, the visitor/family members may feel inspired to adopt more sustainable dietary practices as well. Another initiative the hospital could pursue is making meat options the minority choice in their eateries. As of now, plant-based options are less available than meat options. If this switch was made, more people would be urged to choose the plant-based option. Along with the shift in options, the hospital should provide a challenge. In the past, they have organized challenges such as seeing who can get the most steps or lose more weight. These challenges are usually supported by teams that voluntarily pay a dollar amount for their team to enter. At the end, the team with the most steps, weight lost, or plant-based meals made, win the pot of money. At the same time, departments or teams of employees are working towards a healthier lifestyle. These challenges are usually a fun competition and even boost morale around the hospital. Having teams enter to see who can cook plant-based meals would follow the same principle, helping their families eat better, and provide a resource for recipe sharing among employees. The challenge can be implemented a few times a year to help adopt persistent change in their daily lives and overall health.

These recommended changes benefit public health in many areas. Providing education alone may not help patients adopt a lifestyle change. However, when given tools and resources to do so, there may be a better success rate. Reaching our patient population with the stated initiatives would not burden the health system any further. The dietary team would need to formulate a few weekly meal plan templates for the patient to follow and organize them on pamphlets. Reading Hospital has a large patient population and even with a low success rate it would be changing many people's lives. This effects public health by creating a healthier community which in turn prevents disease, lessens burden on the hospital, offers more support for produce production, and less support for factory farming. All of these outcomes would greatly support public and environmental health. The second recommendation for shifting to a plant-based diet may offer long-term lifestyle change and provide the same benefits to all involved. Organization of a challenge for employees to take part in will benefit public health in similar ways. In addition to those outcomes listed above, this recommendation offers a persistent reminder and resource to adopt a healthier diet. This initiative would foster eating habit change while at work with expanded plant-based options as well as coworker support in changing habits at home. The employee's environment and surrounding social norms could aid in long term lifestyle change. The

benefit of long-term change is that the industries and climate would experience this shift in large numbers of people conquering new eating habits together.

These recommendations on shifting to a plant-based lifestyle clearly has profound effects on human and global health. Reading Hospital making these changes may set the standard for other health systems in pursuit of a more sustainable environment. Large systems need to begin to consider these options and lead the pathway for change as our world deteriorates rapidly if there are no changes.

References:

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