

# in our hospitals

## MACARONI CHEESE

THIS is far too small a portion size, not enough carbohydrate is provided by the pasta and the lack of vegetables makes it imbalanced.

It is certainly not a meal that will provide the necessary calories for an adult patient.



## 'It was like baby food, I could count the pasta on the plate'

By Victoria Allen

**PATIENT** Catherine Hardy was served up a plate of macaroni cheese she described as looking like 'baby food'.

The restaurant owner was presented with a tiny plate of pasta in a fluorescent yellow sauce at Glasgow's Western Infirmary.

She put the picture on Facebook and was inundated with comments of support from equally horrified friends.

The 41-year-old said: 'The food I was given was revolting.'

'It was also not nearly enough food for an adult recovering in hospital, let alone anywhere near meeting five a day.'

'Food is important but even more so when you are not well.'

'I was lucky because I had friends who came in and brought me food but I felt sorry for the older women on my ward who did not. I ended up



Fed up: Catherine Hardy

sharing some of mine with one lady.'

Miss Hardy, who developed a blood infection after being bitten by a cat, was not given any food on the day of her operation, despite emerging from surgery at 9.30pm.

On the next morning she was given a slice of toast with butter but was told there was no jam.

Then came the macaroni cheese. 'It was like baby food and you could count how many pieces of pasta were on the plate,' she said.

'I hadn't ordered it, the person in the bed before me must have done.'

Miss Hardy, who was also served fish and chips in her hospital bed, said: 'It was OK but the fish had clearly been frozen and the chips frozen. It was packet food and not made from scratch.'

'I didn't expect the food to be amazing or restaurant-quality but I expected it to be fresh and tasty.'

'It was much worse than I imagined.'

'Hospitals still seem to be stuck in the 1980s in terms of what they appear to be able to produce. But it is so important because you are feeding people who are ill.'

Meals are nutritionally balanced and are continually being analysed, and we buy wisely.

'In May, at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, we had 125 commendations and one complaint.'

John Wright, director for corporate support services at NHS Ayrshire and Arran, said: 'All patient menus provided by NHS Ayrshire and Arran have been developed with the input of a dietitian to ensure that they meet all national nutritional standards.'

'Sometimes it can be necessary for patients to increase the caloric value of their diet. We believe it is important to provide patients with a range of food choices that meet their nutritional needs.'

A Scottish Government spokes-

man said: 'NHS boards determine the allocation they provide for catering from the resource budgets they are provided by the Scottish Government, which have risen above inflation in each year since 2010-11.'

'The Scottish Government sets rigorous nutritional standards for hospital meals which must be met by all boards.' The spokes-

man added: 'NHS Scotland has also developed Aroma, its own in-house coffee shops in operation in a number of hospitals, which make nutritional snacks available to visitors and staff.'

'All profits from Aroma are reinvested in the NHS in Scotland.'

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## TELL US YOUR STORY

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# NUTRITIOUS MEALS DON'T HAVE TO COST A FORTUNE

COMMENTARY

By Priya Tew

**H**OSPITAL food is as important as patients' medication to get right. Getting it wrong, in the worst cases, can put their lives at risk.

The evidence shows that nutrition plays a vital role in recovery and that patients recover faster and have a shorter hospital stay when they receive the right food.

The vital nutritional components for recovery include protein, which is especially important as one of the main building blocks for the body, needed to build cells and repair tissue - very important when a person is ill or following an operation.

Also antioxidants contained within fruit and vegetables are known to help the body fight infection. Carbohydrates are a primary source of energy, which is so important for a patient to get back on their feet again.

I have been very surprised by the lack of nutrition in hospital food, often with the excuse that including the right balance is expensive.

That isn't true. It's about being inventive and creative, for example throwing in a handful of cheap lentils and pulses to add protein.

Worryingly, we are seeing patients who are coming out of hospital having actually lost weight. They are leaving and having to recover from their hospital stay.

Already a high proportion of people, particularly the elderly, go into hospital who are malnourished. The risk is that they will come out more malnourished, which can leave them vulnerable to illness.

If a patient is not getting enough nutrition, it can affect the function of their body and will lead to weight loss. Being underweight can leave the body less able to heal itself.

After surgery, for example, this can leave people weaker and take them longer to recover.

When the body is severely underweight it can start to shut down, cognitive function can be impaired

and the body's systems will not work as efficiently. Research shows the earlier someone is given good nutrition, the better and more quickly they return to health.

Hospitals may be providing poor food to save money but if patients' nutrition is so poor that they take longer to recover, they stay in hospital for longer.

That means a vast expense for providing them with a hospital bed, which must also be taken into account.

It is not just about the nutritional content of the food, however, because portion sizes and calorie content are also important.

When the body is stressed, in a time of infection, it needs more calories to help it fight it off.

A group of the hospital population who often come in malnourished are older people who have had hip replacements.

Some of the meals we are seeing being served up to hospital patients are just far too small or do not have the calories they need.

They may not need more than 200 extra calories a day but the problem is that they might miss a meal-time, the food might look unappetising and they might leave it or it may arrive at their bed cold.

These are the problems which occur with the logistics of trying to feed thousands of people in one place. The solution is not to provide these calories through junk food, as many people are also in hospital with diabetes or obesity-related illnesses.

It is important that food looks appetising and tempts patients to want to eat it.

People who are in hospital generally don't want to be there, they are in a low mood and they don't have much of an appetite.

We need delicious and nutritious hospital food which they want to eat and which will bring them back to health.

● Priya Tew, a spokesman for the British Dietetic Association, worked with TV chef James Martin on his programme *Operation Hospital Food*.