

# In the public interest

A small revolution in food is taking place at the Royal Brompton Hospital, as it participates in a scheme to increase locally-sourced provisions. *Keren Sall* takes a closer look

Think of hospital food – particularly meat – and it conjures up an unappetising image, which, unsurprisingly, has received the thumbs-down from patients. But one swift visit to the Royal Brompton Hospital in London is enough to dispel that picture.

The hospital has a light airy Bistrot-style restaurant and outpatients' snack bar in Fulham Road and a coffee bar in its foyer, which is open to visitors, outpatients and the local community. Downstairs is a plusher restaurant with white table linen. Visitors pay 30% more for the food, but they are happy to do so, because it's good. A sampling of the beef pie served there has my taste buds begging for more of the tasty, tender meat.

Mike Duckett, catering manager of the Royal Brompton Hospital, is satisfied to see me tucking in. It reaffirms his decision to increase the proportion of local and organic meat served to staff, patients and visitors.

Duckett, who initially trained as a chef in hotels, is passionate about this and the hospital now serves organic meat twice a week. "We want to increase the amount of local and

organic meat we serve, as we feel it is more sustainable because it ploughs taxpayers' money back into the local economy," he says.

As a result, the Royal Brompton has been participating in a Defra-funded initiative, the London Hospital Food Project, with three other hospitals – the Ealing General, Bethlehem Royal and St George – to help it increase such provision. "We want to serve food that is not only healthier for our patients but is also purchased in a more responsible way," he says.

## LONDON FOOD LINK

Spearheading the initiative is the London Food Link (LFL), a project launched by Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming and the Soil Association. The LFL acts as a broker between the hospitals and food producers, while the Soil Association provides expertise on organic and locally produced food. Duckett and other hospital catering managers meet with LFL every month to discuss how the project is going. "Working together, I'm very optimistic that we can raise the proportion of local and organic food in our hospitals," he says.

He believes that a key factor will be to link farmers and producers with the hospitals' existing supply chains. "That will mean small producers don't have to worry about transporting produce to lots of sites in London."

In the long-term, he hopes that the project can be broadened to include other large public sector organisations. "It would be good to work together with education, local government and, perhaps, the armed forces in their procurement," he says.

The Royal Brompton now has three deliveries a week, curtailing the food miles that Duckett is so keen to remove. "Buying local is not necessarily dearer, as we cut out the middleman," he says.

As a result, he has also stopped working with some of the hospital's large-scale suppliers, because they could not make any changes in favour of buying local and organic produce. That said, Duckett has to work within the constraints of NHS budgets, which are all about cutting public expenditure. He has a budget of £3.50 per patient a day for all meals and snacks, which is slightly more generous than the London average of £2.90 a day. "We get more because our patients need more protein

and extra care as they might have had open heart surgery. The Trust allocates us this and, historically, we have always had a bit more."

The hospital supplies around 290 patient meals and 1,500 staff and visitor meals a day, for which his meat budget is a paltry £90,000 a year. The NHS tends to negotiate most supply contracts and looks at food in terms of pounds and pence. Sometimes this can result in gristle and sinew on the plate, which nobody wants to eat. But, with the help of Sustain and the Soil Association, Duckett has been working to change it all and admits, "It has been a slow process."

## CHANGE IS TAKING PLACE

Change is taking place, however, as Duckett educates staff at the hospital about the cut, size and quality of the meat. "The tendering department invites us for specification evaluation meetings and, from these, they invite people to tender and sort out who wins," he says.

He is keen to spend his budget wisely and is constantly looking for ways he can do this. A recent project has included looking at ways of using



Left and below: Staff preparing meals in the Royal Brompton's kitchens Bottom: Catering manager Mike Duckett: 'We want to serve food that is purchased in a responsible way'

cuts of meat not normally required by the restaurant and hotel – namely forequarters. "Most of the meat comes from the hindquarters – the sirloin steaks, the ribs, the nicer meat. The forequarter is where you get the mince and the stewing steak. But there are parts of the forequarter – the top flank, for example – which you can slow-roast if you cut them right."

The Meat & Livestock Commission has been instrumental in working with Middlesex Meat Co to supply these cuts to the Royal Brompton. "The MLC has butchers with fantastic skills and the way they cut the meat can turn it into something completely different," says Duckett, who is also planning to trial shoulders of lamb from South Downs Lamb, with the help of Defra.

## SUPPLY PATH

The Royal Brompton is one of a very few hospitals with a kitchen and nine chefs, who prepare food daily on the premises, apart from halal and kosher meals, which come ready-made.

Food Safety and new EU regulations mean that no joints over 5-7kg can be supplied to the hospital. Neither can the Royal Brompton have raw chicken coming into the establishment. "There's less wastage, but we are paying for the meat because someone else is doing the preparation," Duckett explains.

The fresh pork, which is all British, comes from Middlesex Meat Co, based next door to Wembley stadium. The company, which also supplies meat to the Pinewood and Shepperton Studios, also provides the Royal Brompton with chicken, lamb and beef, not all of which is British. The chicken and lamb supplied is slaughtered using halal-approved methods.

The chicken comes as supremes or legs. "Middlesex has a butcher who trims up supremes for the restaurants and we only have 5-8% shrinkage, which is good," says Duckett, explaining his choice.

Pure Organics, based in Amesbury, Wiltshire, supplies the organic burgers, additive-free sausages, and 100% chic-ken breast, which is used for nuggets. Ready-made halal meals are supplied by Mrs Gill's Kitchen, kosher meals by the Hospital Kosher Company, and frozen items, such as kebabs, are brought in for functions from 3663.

Each year, the government spends around £2bn on providing food to the public sector and British producers have reaped little benefit, but Duckett's campaign and example could be just the thing to change all that. ●