Red is the colour

A new system has been introduced at Colchester General Hospital to ensure that all the nutritional requirements of elderly patients are fully met.

Patients who need help with eating are served meals on red trays and those who need encouragement with their fluid intake to prevent dehydration are given a water jug with a red lid.

It is the latest initiative to be introduced by Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust so that patients who need assistance at meal times consistently receive adequate levels of nutrition.

Louise Notley, Nurse Consultant for Older People, said the red tray system had been introduced onto the four care of the elderly wards at Colchester General Hospital.

"Malnutrition and poor hydration can have serious consequences for patients which is why we have introduced these latest simple steps to ensure they have enough to eat and drink," she said.

"Nationally, organisations like Age UK have expressed concerns that some older patients in hospitals have experienced malnutrition.

"The object of the red trays, which is their initiative, and also the red jug lid project is to signal to staff that these particular patients need help with eating and drinking.

"It might be because of a physical problem so that, for example, some patients cannot hold cutlery, or because a patient has dementia, which we are seeing more of as the population grows older.

"It is still relatively early days but I am already aware that we are receiving fewer complaints about patients not getting enough food."

A red tray must not be taken away from the patient until they have been able to eat what they want to and details of what they have eaten have been recorded.

A red jug lid reminds staff to encourage the patient to drink. The patient has their cup and jug, which are kept topped up, and call-bell within easy reach.

Ms Notley said that at any one time 15%-25% of patients on the care of the elderly wards are benefiting from the red tray system.

Help at meal times is provided by nursing staff and also by volunteers who have been given special training.

- more follows -
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Currently, the Trust, which consists of Colchester General Hospital and Essex County Hospital, has nine volunteers but is looking for more.

Among the other initiatives the Trust has introduced are:

- protected meal times – non-urgent work, such as drug rounds and routine investigations, are not carried out at meal times so that nurses are freed up to help patients with their meals
- green plastic aprons – these are worn by nurses involved in serving meals and helping patients with their food to provide a clear message to other health care professionals that they are undertaking non-clinical work
- screening – all adult inpatients are assessed on admission by staff in order to identify those at risk of malnutrition
- training – dietitians from the Trust are involved in training nursing staff at all levels in order to increase their skills and knowledge of nutrition

In addition, Tina Goodey, a clinical nurse specialist for nutrition, has been appointed to work Trust-wide in the assessment and management of patients with complex nutritional needs and to support staff on the wards.

* Anyone who is interested in working as a volunteer to help patients at meal times should contact Lucy Archer at Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust. Tel 01206 744406; email lucy.archer@colchesterhospital.nhs.uk

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