

Frontline

A food-first approach



Providers should take action now to improve the quality of the food, nutrition and mealtime experience in aged care, not after the royal commission reports its findings, writes CHERIE HUGO.

When people learn about The Lantern Project, they often then share with me an experience with food they've observed with a grandparent, parent or friend in an aged care home. People like and understand the importance of a meal.

This has been amplified during the past few months whilst our team lived in aged care homes to demonstrate the Lantern Approach across an organisation. It has been a wonderful and positive experience.

The team and I have been sleeping, eating and working across an NSW aged care organisation's seven homes in NSW to work with the aged care organisation to identify ways to further raise the bar on the food and mealtime experience for their residents across each of the sites. The homes are largely multicultural and dementia-specific communities.

At one morning foodie group meeting during the live-in experience, in a room full of mostly residents and family with an Italian heritage, residents were unanimous in what their menus lacked. They asked for "more pasta."

It was a simple request that sparked a passionate debate about the correct recipe for meatballs. Whichever nonna's recipe wins out, it's certain that the recipe will be more appetising, accepted and consumed by residents than a regular menu of party pies or coloured pureed blobs.



Cherie Hugo

Workforce barriers

At The Lantern Project, I collaborate with over 850 stakeholders including motivated aged care providers around the country and internationally to improve the quality of food served to residents.

Our February meeting included a poll to take the pulse on the current sentiments across the industry (see box opposite). Staff and staff training were by far the strongest problem areas highlighted in the meeting.

The workforce is set to take a battering as a result of the royal commission, adding to aged care workforce issues highlighted in last year's workforce strategy taskforce report. My 20 years of consulting to aged care homes combined with the work of our collaboration and recent live-in project shows an aged care workforce with hearts of gold, but which is clearly under the pump.

In response to the aged care workforce taskforce findings, a number of Lantern members are leading the government-driven national Nutrition and Mealtimes Technical Advisory Committee around training, curriculum and workforce recruitment and retention. Supporting and attracting the right people to this industry will be vital for the future of quality aged care.

Six years on from its launch, Lantern offers the industry

Taking the Industry's pulse

The Lantern Project meeting on 1 February 2019 involved 75 stakeholders and industry experts from across Australia. The result of a poll taken on the day include:

- ✓ staffing and staff training are the most pressing barriers to improving the aged care food, nutrition and mealtime experience
- ✓ 92 per cent of respondents feel hospitality training should be mandatory for aged care staff involved in food, nutrition and the mealtime experience

- ✓ 62 per cent of respondents feel a spend of \$6.08 per resident per day on food in aged care is inadequate
- ✓ 53 per cent of respondents feel a minimum food spend limit should be mandatory
- ✓ 93 per cent of respondents are keen for Lantern to continue action-based research in the sector.
- ✓ 94 per cent of respondents are supportive of the Lantern Excellence rating.

hands-on learnings and support with its innovative model of care through monthly meetings, forums, workshops and consultation. We espouse the benefits of a food-first approach, which importantly calls on the collective wisdom of the residents, who have often been passionate cooks for 80 years or more.

It has been reinforced time and again by living and connecting with residents and their families that food is an emotive thing and about so much more than just nutrition. A nutritious meal won't nourish a resident if it's not eaten.

Quite often the environment, staffing, social engagement before and during a meal, food quality and presentation can kibosh well-meaning attempts to put a nutritious meal on the table.

Time for change

In 2019 we've moved from the aged care home to the home of Government in Canberra meeting with Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care Ken Wyatt and the representatives from Department of Health to share our evidence-based model of care. We've also made submissions to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

Our solutions offer immediate benefits for an industry bracing itself in an ongoing torrent of bad press from the royal commission. Our good news message is the aged care industry can take control of its own destiny and be proactive now, rather than waiting to be reactive in the face of the impending and inevitable harsh criticisms arising from the royal commission in its final report next year.

While we see and share first-hand evidence of good news stories through The Lantern Project, aged care food remains largely a negative topic. The Aged Care Complaints Commissioner received 5,779 complaints in 2017-2018 and food topped the list for the most common reason behind a complaint.

The 4Corners aged care investigation in 2018 gathered 4,000 stories of which food was the leading issue and one that is highly emotive. Add to this the recent Consumer Experience Report from the Quality and Safety Commission (formerly Aged Care Quality Agency), which lists food and loneliness as the top two issues residents identified.

This all gives weight to the royal commission's focus on nutrition. Many of the terms of reference of the inquiry relate directly or indirectly to food, nutrition and the mealtime experience for residents.

If this isn't your organisation's priority, it should be. It is certainly a priority for the royal commission.

Solutions

We don't need to wait until the royal commission finishes to raise the bar and see more positive stories. The sector can immediately improve the lives of those in its care and reassure relatives and regulators by actively prioritising the thing residents most value – food and the mealtime experience.

Clinical indicators, quality of life and health outcomes pivot directly on appropriate nutrition. Get food and the mealtime experience right and wellbeing and quality of life will be achieved.

This involves making an upfront safe investment into:

- quality food
- the dining environment
- engagement of allied health to proactively manage dietary requirements
- staff training and appropriate equipment involved in mealtimes.

Our research and cost-effective strategies offer confidence to aged care homes around the safe investment and a way of tackling the topic in a strategic way.

The Lantern Project had a head start on the royal commission quality discussion and the approaching commencement of the new Aged Care Quality Standards. Learnings from six years of collaboration, discussions and research have provided solid understanding as to the touchpoints impacting the resident food, nutrition and mealtime experience.

The Lantern approach principles have informed the guidelines of the new quality standards through our advisory work with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission and its predecessor the Australian Aged Care Quality Agency. >





The Lantern Approach

Our set of principles and awards-based rating system focuses on, measures and quantifies the key touchpoints required to achieve success in the food, nutrition and mealtime experience space.

It is set with key criteria and powered by an algorithm to provide an organisation a clear yardstick around current strengths and weaknesses across the key Lantern Approach principles.

The process uses our EXPLORE app, which is mealtime experience capture tool, to gather stories directly from residents, family and staff and identify and tailor strategies around a home's individualised priorities and values.

Information captured through the Lantern Approach provides a roadmap for positive change and support to successfully enact change. It also supports accreditation through its alignment with the quality standards. Homes have the opportunity to aim for and reach a Lantern Excellence rating for industry recognition in the food, nutrition and mealtime experience space.

We all know that Australians are living longer than ever before and that demand for aged care services is growing as a result. By 2056, an estimated 8.7 million people will be classified as older Australians.

Chances are we will know one of them or be one ourselves. The aged care royal commission is an opportunity to right wrongs, raise the bar, support the aged care workforce and advocate for much needed funding to treat our elders with the dignity they deserve.

We can begin immediately with a decent meal. ■
Dr Cherie Hugo is the founder of The Lantern Project and director of My Nutrition Clinic, a team of accredited practising dietitians consulting to aged care, hospitals and community.

A community of practice

The Lantern Project is sharing its learnings with the sector through:

- ✓ writing the Nutrition and Hydration, Unplanned Weight Loss and Clinical Deterioration guidelines for the new Aged Care Quality Standards. See agedcarequality.gov.au
- ✓ involvement in the national Standards Guidance Reference Group
- ✓ chairing the Aged Care Workforce Taskforce's Nutrition and Mealtime Experience Technical Advisory Group. Most members of this group are Lantern members representing varying roles in the industry.
- ✓ publishing internationally referenced papers around aged care mealtime complexity, including the aged care budget paper *What does it cost to feed aged care residents in Australia?* See onlinelibrary.wiley.com
- ✓ holding monthly national collaboration meetings with increasing engagement
- ✓ producing Lantern "Little Things" videos to share cost-effective strategies that have demonstrated a positive impact for residents. See The Lantern Project's Vimeo site vimeo.com/user61898707
- ✓ running a forum beside the Better Practice National conference in August 2018 focused on tackling the current dissonance between the new Aged Care Quality Standards, which promote resident choice, and aged care food safety guidelines, which restrict resident choice. The project is working on a legislative instrument to solve this problem.
- ✓ delivering education roadshows in collaboration with Lantern members such as a dysphagia roadshow, the Taste for Change workshop and the Maggie Beer Foundation Food For Thought workshop.

About The Lantern Project

Our philosophy is that a food-first approach to food, nutrition and mealtime experience for aged care residents offers better health and quality of life outcomes for residents and cost savings for aged care organisations and government.

The Lantern Project operates as a diverse community of practice of like-minded people who come together once a month to discuss issues, explore, research and share sector news around the aged care food, nutrition and mealtime experience.

The project has an action-based research arm and an education arm. It advocates at a policy level and has a consultancy arm designed to rate the aged care food and mealtime experience and offer individualised solutions for aged care providers.

Collaboration members include aged care CEOs, facility and chef managers, catering staff, nurses, dietitians, speech pathologists, general practitioners, dementia experts, gerontologists, diversional therapists, care workers, horticultural therapists, industry peak bodies, Quality and Safety Commission representatives and researchers.

Head to thelanternproject.com.au to join in the conversation and mailing list for monthly invites to meetings and events.