Food & dining

Aged care providers, chefs and nutritionists are collaborating to revolutionise aged care’s food culture, writes Cherie Hugo.

Since we launched in 2014, the Lantern Project has been bringing together chefs, nutrition experts and aged care providers to create fundamental change in food and nutrition across Australian residential aged care.

Backed by Australian food personalities Maggie Beer, Simon Bryant and Peter Morgan-Jones and supported by The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, The Lantern Project set itself the huge task of revolutionising aged care’s food culture.

The collaboration identified seven key objectives to create widespread industry change across areas of research, advocacy and education to improve the quality of life of residents through food.

The objectives include identifying the cost savings that can be made through good nutrition in aged care, advocating for changes to the Aged Care Funding Instrument and accreditation process, as well as increasing the sector’s bargaining power to purchase locally grown, high quality Australian produce.

Importance of meal times

In the early days of project, a linguist attended one of our meetings. It may seem strange that an expert in language and words would be interested in nutrition and aged care.

But the connection quickly became apparent. Food has the power to ignite or extinguish mealtime conversation.

A welcoming dining setting, with great ambiance and good food, often keeps conversation going long after the food has been eaten. By engaging the senses during a meal, memories are triggered and stories shared.

We know a mealtime is more than just food and nutrition. Meal times are also about communication, company and connection. If you get this right, then nutrition falls into place, less reliance on supplements and happier residents and staff.

The Lantern Project is recording those dining experiences and we’re asking for input. If you work, visit or live in an aged care facility, we want your stories. Stories convey sentiment and values, and by gathering stories through our unique software we can pinpoint in real-time where priorities lay in aged care dining.

The stories may be positive experiences, areas you think need improving, or what is most important to you.

We are asking residents, staff, family and friends to share their stories with us by either downloading our free app or going to our website to record the story online.

Identifying key issues

Since the last update on our project was published in Australian Aged Care Agenda early in 2015, our Lantern Collaboration has continued to grow.

Random are more than welcome to connect if they are looking to join a diverse group of people with the central goal to improve quality of life of older Australians through food.

There are many novel ideas emerging out of the monthly collaboration meetings and we recently launched online aged care food forum.

So far we have identified some key issues and barriers. These include:

- staff buy-in, education and training
- resident engagement, choice and empowerment
- food budget limitations without dietary input contribute to poor health outcomes, quality of life and malnutrition
- inconsistencies in mealtime management – particularly for residents with dysphagia
- high incidence of poor oral health in aged care and insufficient access to dental services naturally impacts on health outcomes and reduces quality of life.

Successes to date

A number of initiatives and resources have been developed in response to these issues.

For instance, we have developed a platform to gather thousands of food stories to better understand the complexity of the mealtime experience, via the EXPLORE app. The app is free to download or access via our website for residents, staff, family and any visiting health professionals.

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Students can bring
their kitchen garden program learnings and passion (as well as produce) and connect with older generations through the great unifier of food.

We’ve also launched monthly collaboration meetings (first Friday of each month for those interested in joining in), as well as aged care cooking sessions and demos including residents in the conversation.

Our education programs include the Dining by Design Schools run internationally by HammondCare, the Maggie Beer Foundation education programs, the My Nutrition Clinic Endorsed Nutrition Education Programs for Healthcare and Catering Staff, and the Community Nutrition Education Programs.

We’ve seen pureed diet innovations from a number of sites including Southern Cross Care Victoria and McKenzie Aged Care Group.

There has also been dissemination of ideas generated from the collaboration through pathways such as Nutrition Australia Queensland’s Aged Care Nutrition Advisory Service, the Maggie Beer Foundation newsletters and through Lantern presentations to diverse populations.

There has been a reduction in supplement over-reliance through flavour amplification and novel fortification strategies, as documented in The Lantern Project’s NOURISH study.

Finally, the Lantern forums have facilitated discussion on focused topics including engaging the senses, horticultural therapy, aged care funding, innovative exercise programs in aged care and their role on food intake and quality of life, and hotel-style room service cooking on demand.

**POSITIVE RESPONSES**

The feedback from aged care staff who have taken part in the project confirm to us the value of the conversations and resource sharing being facilitated.

For example, Rick Stewart, catering manager at Feros Care said: “I have been motivated by the collaborative meetings; a group with a diverse mix of skills, from very different backgrounds and aged care perspectives willing to share their ideas and knowledge for the sake of resident outcomes.”

Similarly, Ian Burman, hospitality manager at Southern Cross Care Victoria said: “Being part of the Lantern Project, and hearing how aged care providers are improving the dining experience for residents in Australia, is a privilege... I find the Lantern project can put me in contact with like-minded people can assist us to innovate further.”

As always, we welcome further involvement from aged care staff. Get involved with our EXPLORE app study where we can collate stories shared at your aged care facility and offer feedback in real time as to opportunities, barriers and values around the dining experience.

The app is fun, easy to use and tactile. This can be done ad hoc, or if you would like to enlist your aged care facility officially in my PhD study we can in return provide specific quantifiable data with insights into individual key priorities for your site. Go to thelanternproject.com.au for more information.

Cherie Hugo is the founder of The Lantern Project and director of My Nutrition Clinic. She is completing her PhD in conjunction with The Lantern Project through Bond University. cherie@mynutritionclinic.com