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How to use a Residents' Meal Preference Survey (MPS) to get resident feedback and support menu planning

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How to use a Residents' Meal Preference Survey (MPS) to get resident feedback and support menu planning

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Key words – Meal preferences, residential aged care, menu planning, tool template

Practical application

1. **A tool to collect information from residents or families about meal preferences**
2. **Using meal preference data in planning menus**
3. **Tool provides evidence to demonstrate collecting feedback on the foodservice system and quality information for audits/reviews.**

Introduction

Providing meals in residential aged care which are nutritious, appetising and meet the needs of residents is a continuing challenge.[1] Residential aged care foodservices, for many residents, is their sole source of nourishment.[2] Failure to understand the types of foods which elderly people enjoy can have a negative impact upon their intake, leading to poor nutritional status and poor health outcomes. The challenge for aged care homes is to reduce these negative impacts and ensure that menus reflect the foods which residents will want to eat.[2] The menu forms the heart of the foodservice operation. Menu planning is not just about ensuring an adequate nutritional content it should also address psycho-social needs as well through considering meal preferences and habits of the population.[3] Therefore, menu planning and design are essential for ensuring that residents are satisfied with the foods which are being provided, including those food items which the residents most identify with, and removing those which are not popular.

The difficulty with aged care is that while some residents can exercise a choice many, if not the majority, are unable to do so due to their frailty or cognitive state.[3] Menu planning must reflect the population group residing in the aged care facility, taking into consideration age, religious, social and meal preference. As part of the Aged Care Quality Standards 6: Food & Nutrition Outcome 6.2 Assessment of nutritional needs and preferences[4] there is a requirement for aged care homes to undertake processes which will demonstrate engagement with residents. The Meal Preference Survey (MPS) is an example of a tool which can be used to collect resident data on preferences. It is a tool which supports the collection of data from residents and family/friends. While it has not been scientifically validated, it has proven useful in practice, looking at both menu items and mealtimes.

[1] Pierce, R. P., Hodges, P. A. M., Merz, B., & Olivey, A. (1987). Food Preferences and Perceptions of Institutionalized Eldery: A Case Report. *Journal of Nutrition for the Elderly, 7*(1), 35-42.

[2] Winterburn, S. (2009). Residents choice of an control over food in care homes. *Nursing Older People, 21*(3), 34-37.

3. Kennewll, S., & Kokkinakos, M. (2001) Food preference in in patients in an Australian teaching hopsitla – what has happened in the last 12 year. Australian Journal of Nutrition & dietetics, 58 (1) 37-44.

4. Aged Care & Quality Standards 2024 Std 6 Aged Care and Quality Commission https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/providers/quality-standards

Using the MPS

The MPS is used in conjunction with the home's menu. The survey design uses a mixture of tick boxes with some open-ended questions to allow residents to provide additional food preferences, likes and dislikes. The survey is best used face to face with residents, though family or friends will be able to complete the survey with minimal support, (on-line if necessary).

Survey components

The survey components include lunch (main meal) and alternative choice, desserts, soups and hot entrees (evening meal). Each of these meal components also asks residents to make any other suggestions on the types of food they would like to include on the menu. The survey asks residents to choose when they would like certain meal items - for example soup at lunch or at the evening meal or both. The survey can be used regularly to gauge seasonal variation in the menu such as a summer and winter menu.

Process to implement

1. Indicate to residents and family that the MPS will be undertaken (newsletters or home communications/residents)
2. Align your menu to the MPS tool
3. Organise for the survey to be sent out and support residents to complete
4. Collect surveys (put a time frame on for collection)
5. Enter results into excel to help with tabulation
6. Share the outcomes with residents, family and management
7. Make appropriate menu changes

Preference survey example

A meal preference survey (MPS) example can be found at the end of this paper. Each home can use this template and add in their own menu data.

The data from the survey can be analysed using an Excel spreadsheet by entering all the information and using a simple adding tool to calculate the popularity of responses.

**Example data outlining what kind of data is produced**

The preference survey data provided here as an example, was collected from 83 residents out of 184 at two aged care homes over three days. This equates to a response rate of 45%. The reasons provided by residents for not participating included: declined to participate; cognitively unable to complete the interview; and being unavailable during the three days of data collection.

Interpreting The Meal Preference Survey data

Figure one shows that overall, residents wanted soups for the evening meal (59% n=49). Lunch dessert was still a popular inclusion, with a second dessert added to the evening meal an even more popular addition (45% n= 37). Residents reported that they liked their hot meal during the day (54% n=45) which supported making no change to the existing menu. Interpreting the results for salad and sandwiches indicated that these were preferred at the evening meal (31% n= 26) and (37% n=31).

Many residents either did not respond or had no preference to when the hot entree was served, with a similar result for bread. This again shows that sometimes residents don't respond and are satisfied with the current foodservice, hence no changes are required. However, the data provide the evidence to support those decisions.

Figure one menu pattern preference
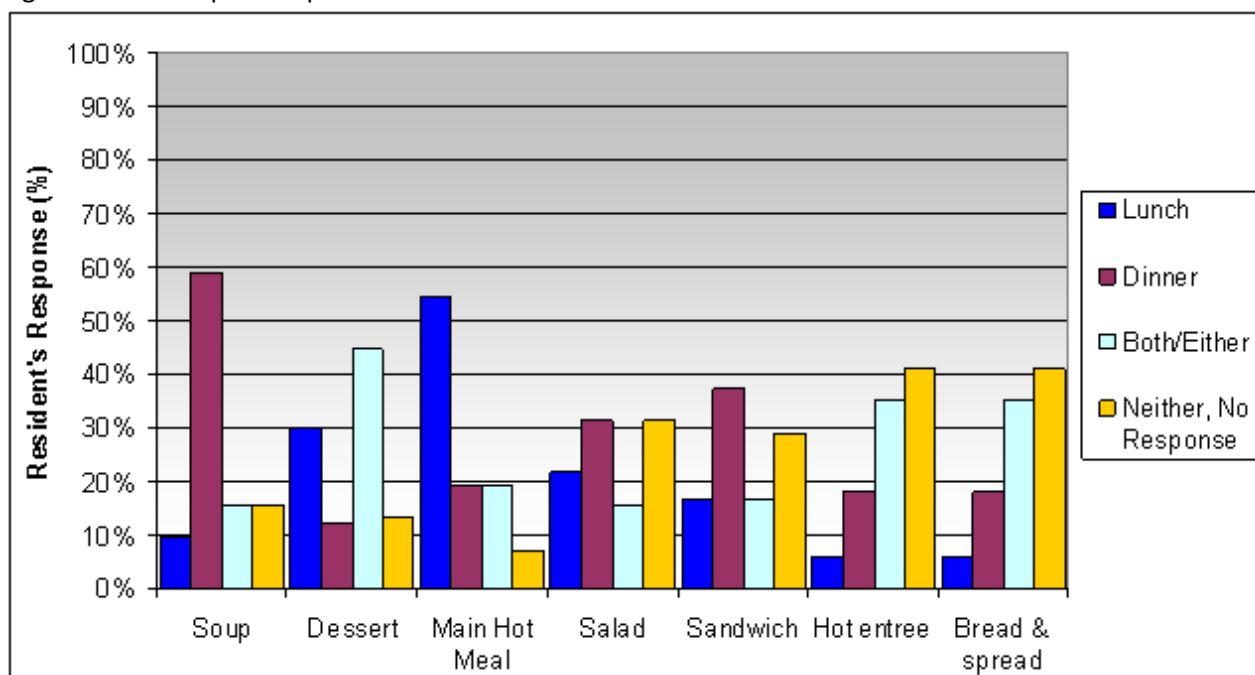
The MPS can also measure the popularity of an item currently on the menu as shown by figure two. This highlights the two main choices that were provided at the lunch meal and can support the keeping or removing of specific menu items.

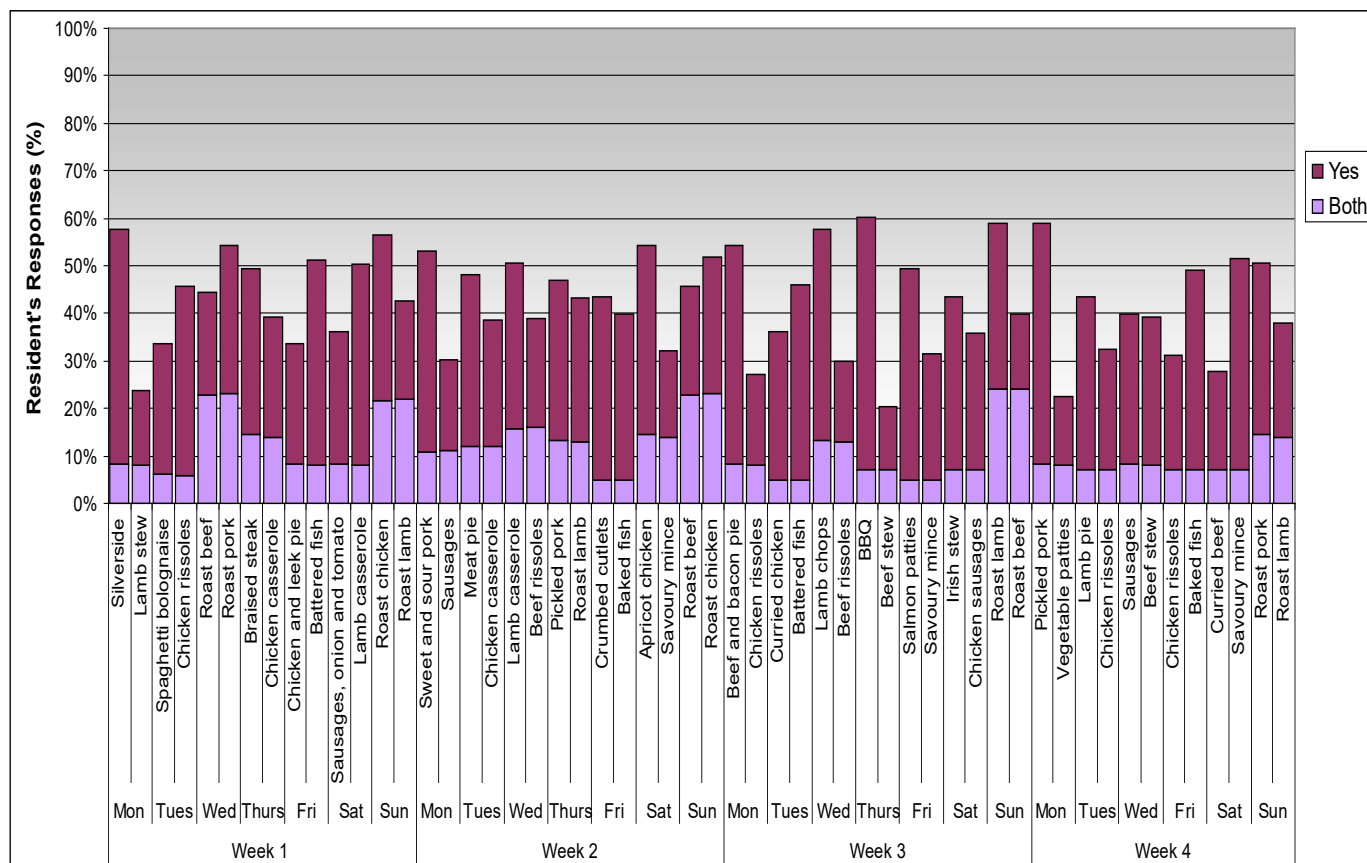Figure two main meal options (1st and 2nd alternative) n= 83
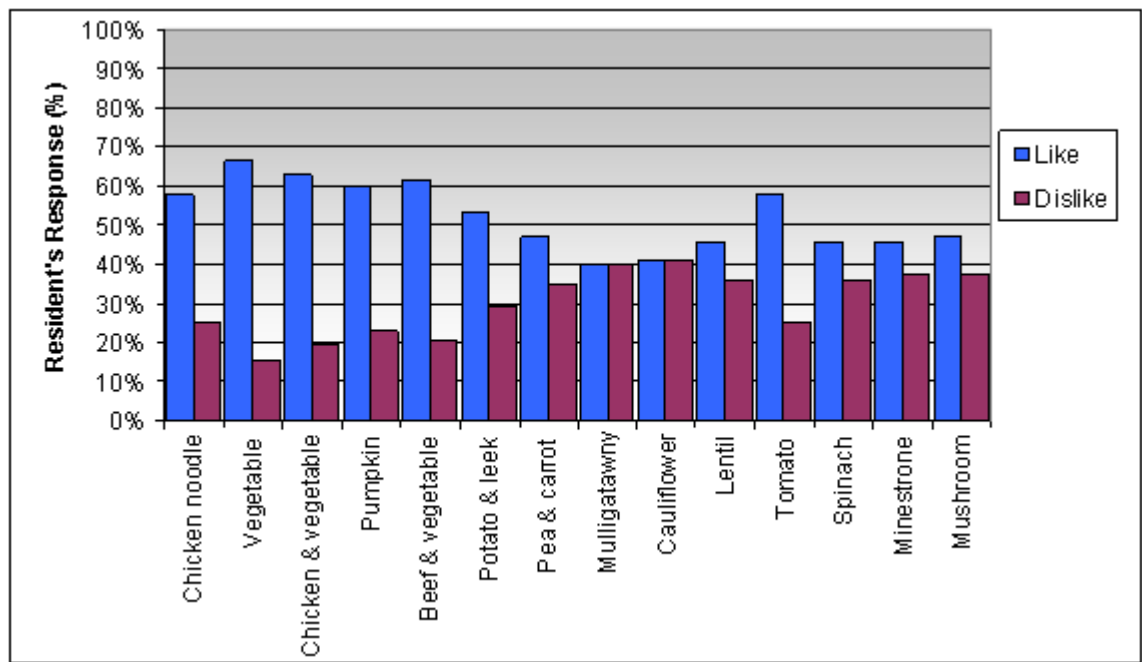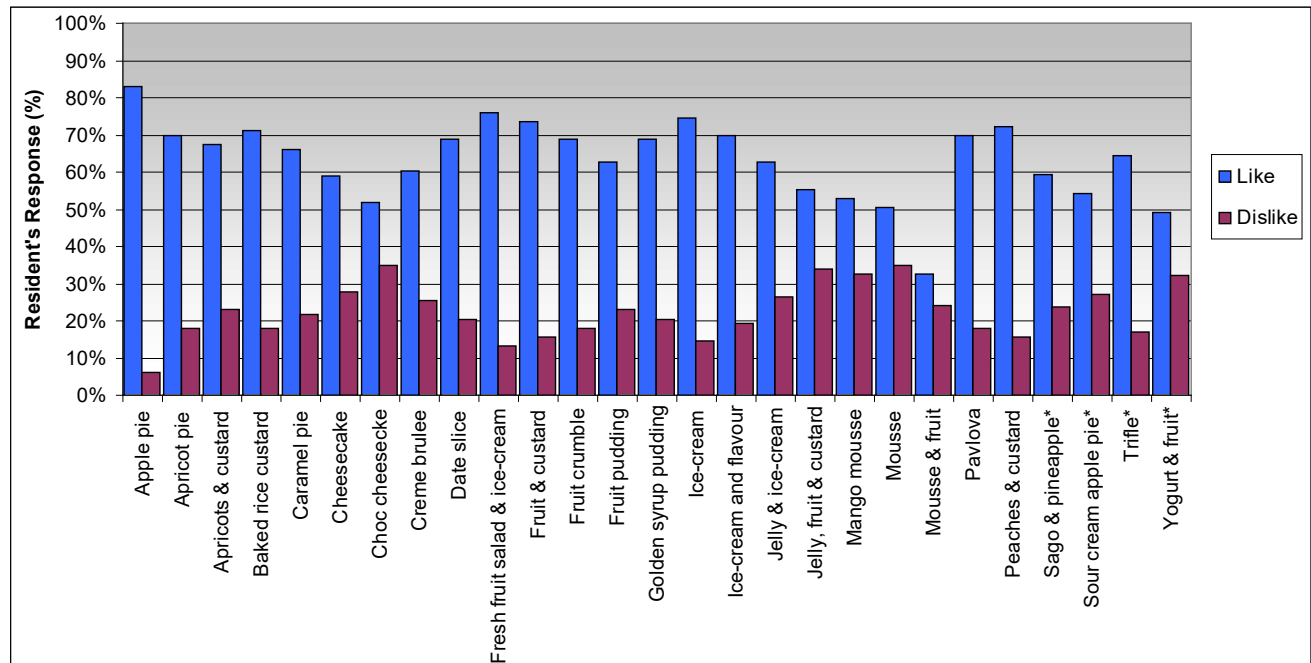
Figure three soup preferences n=83

Figure four demonstrates that desserts as a group are incredibly popular on this aged care home menu. However it also identifies which dessert is least popular (mousse), allowing the menu planner to focus on where change should occur.

Figure four desserts n=83

Discussion

The MPS is a useful tool for RAC foodservice providers. The example data above shows that residents at this aged home have clear preferences about the foods they would like to eat and when they would like meals served. This example data highlights what is already known about aged care homes - that desserts are the most popular menu item among residents. The example data shows some dessert items reaching over 70% in preference popularity with apple pie over 80%. Items such as ice cream are known to be very popular and the example data indicates that any dessert with ice cream achieved a preference rating 60% and above (jelly and ice cream, ice cream and flavouring, ice cream and fresh fruit salad and ice cream).

The sample data here demonstrated that there was a preference for two desserts per day which would then be taken into consideration when planning the menu Desserts, especially milk-based desserts are a major source of calcium and protein, and are usually easy to eat.

The sample data also show that the most popular main meals rating over 50% for preference were meals based around meat and vegetables. These included silverside, the roast meals, BBQ and lamb chops. Foodservice managers can use this type of data to support the inclusion of preferred foods on their menus. It also demonstrates partnering with residents, getting feedback which can be used to provide evidence for audit, reviews and accreditation.

While this tool is not validated in the scientific sense, it has great practical value. It is easy to use, and provides staff with confidence that the menu is meeting the needs of the residents. As such, it is a quality assurance tool. It's main purpose is to support staff of any foodservices to develop menus that are satisfactory to the residents. Doing so will increase quality, and enhance the chance of the food being consumed and hence a reduction in malnutrition.

NACI Library www.nacinstitute.com.au

A template of the Meal Preference Survey (MPS) can be found in the NACi library

To reference this paper

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Meal Preference Survey (MPS) Template

This is a template and the examples shown below can be changed to suit your foodservice operations. Add in your menu items and any other questions you think are important for your home.

Resident Name   Date

Home area (dining room)

Menu Pattern Preferences (this checks to see when meals will be served)

Menu pattern	Lunch	Evening meal
Soup		
Desserts		
Hot meals		
Lite meals		
Desserts		
Salads		
Sandwiches		
Hot finger food/hot entrees		
Bread & spreads		

Fluid Preferences

	Breakfast	MT	Lunch	AT	Evening meal	Supper
Tea						
Coffee						
Water						
Cordial						
Milk						
Juice						
ADD IN						

Suggestions for other ideas -

Breakfast – any additional breakfast items

Cereals	Breads	Fruits	Yogurt	

Hot breakfast

Hot breakfast menu items	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Baked beans				
Scrambled eggs				
Tomato and onion				
Bacon and scrambled eggs				

Mid meal snacks

Mid-meal snacks	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Apple muffins				
Banana cake				

Lunch main

Lunch main (1)	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Roast chicken				

Lunch main (2)	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Butter chicken				

Desserts

Deserts menu items	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Mango cheesecake				
Apple crumble				

Soups

Soup menu items	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Tomato				
Pumpkin				

Hot entree

Hot entrée menu items	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Quiche				
Pizza				

Dessert (evening meal)

Dessert evening	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Yogurt and fruit				
Cream rice				

Sandwiches & salad

Sandwich & salads	Like	Dislikes	Neither	Other Suggestions
Ham sandwiches				
Chicken sandwiches				
Cheese salad				
Ham salad				

Other questions to consider to use include
Are there any foods you would like to eat in summer?
Are there any foods you would like to eat in winter?
Do you have any suggestions for what you would like to eat at
Morning tea
Afternoon tea
Supper

Are there any ethnic foods/dishes you would like to eat"

Are there any meals/dishes on the menu you do not like and never eat?

ADD IN ANY OTHER TABLE THAT SUITES YOUR MENU