



Better food, better health, better environment: the benefits of sustainable food procurement in hospitals

Sustainable food procurement is a buying policy which favours minimally processed, locally produced, organic, seasonal and fairly traded foods. This factsheet explains why sustainable food procurement is capturing the imagination of healthcare providers.

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The poor quality of food served in many of Europe's hospitals has become a cause for increasing concern as evidence has mounted of the links between an unhealthy diet and serious medical conditions.

Dietary factors are the most significant single preventable cause of ill health. In 2002 the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that "the rapidly growing epidemic of non-communicable diseases, already responsible for some 60% of world deaths, is clearly related to changes in global dietary patterns and increased consumption of industrially processed fatty, salty and sugary foods"¹.

As the focal point for healthcare provision in Europe, hospitals might be expected to serve nutritious, tasty meals that support recovery from illness and promote a healthy, balanced diet. Instead a succession of surveys and official reports has highlighted public dissatisfaction with the soggy,

Why local, organic and fairtrade?

Locally produced food helps support local economic and social well-being and protect the environment by reducing transport emissions.

Organic food farming produces less pollution, uses less energy, creates better conditions for wildlife, supports higher levels of employment in rural areas and protects soil fertility.

Fairtrade products help sustain the livelihoods of some of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged food producers.



Staff queue for dessert at a hospital canteen in West Zealand, where new menus featuring 50% organic ingredients are proving popular.

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unappetising food on offer and concern among regulators that the health of patients is being undermined.

But it isn't only public health that is influenced by the meals being served on the wards. The food that hospitals choose to procure and the way it is produced, processed and transported can have a profound effect on the environment. Over 30% of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions come from the food and drink sector².

Happily there is a proven method by which healthcare providers can address both the food quality concerns and the environmental, social and economic impacts associated with the meals they serve. That method is what has become known as sustainable food procurement – a buying policy that favours minimally processed, locally produced, organic, seasonal and fairly traded foods.



Sustainable procurement also has the potential to make hospital food healthier and more appetising. Hospitals pursuing a sustainability agenda tend to use more fresh fruit and vegetables and fewer mass-produced processed foods. By buying locally grown produce they can ensure that the food on offer is fresher, tastier and more nutritious. By using organic ingredients they reduce patients' exposure to potentially harmful additives, pesticides and antibiotic residues and increase their intake of vitamins and minerals.



Burgers freshly made with locally produced organic beef became a popular choice on the children's menu, thanks to the pioneering work of the Cornwall Food Programme.

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What is sustainability?

To grasp the principles of sustainable food procurement, it helps to understand the concept of sustainable development from which it derives.

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development, an independent body set up by the United Nations, published *Our Common Future*³ - a manifesto for sustaining human social and economic progress without bankrupting the planet's environmental resources. This report argued forcefully that social, economic and environmental well-being are interdependent – you can't have one without the others. In this context it articulated the concept of sustainable development, which it defined as “improving people's life-enabling habits to meet our needs in the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”.

In 1997 the Amsterdam Treaty made it a formal requirement for environmental protection concerns to be integrated into European Union policies, citing the need to promote sustainable development as the reason for doing so⁴.

By 2001 the EU was adopting its first sustainable development strategy at a meeting of the European Council in Gothenburg⁵. This asserted that “sustainable development should become the central objective of all sectors and policies” and directed member states to “make better use of public procurement to favour environmentally friendly products and services”.

Food sourcing is one of the most important areas of sustainable procurement. Not only does it account for a sizeable proportion of procurement spending, but it also has the potential to contribute directly and positively to people's general health and well-being in a way that most areas of procurement do not.

“If we are what we eat, then public sector food purchasers help shape the lives of millions of people,” says one key UK government document on sustainable procurement. “In hospitals, schools, prisons, and canteens...good food helps maintain good health, promote healing rates and improve concentration and behaviour. But sustainable food procurement isn't just about better nutrition. It's about where the food comes from, how it's produced and transported, and where it ends up. It's about food quality, safety and choice. Most of all, it's about defining best value in its broadest sense.”⁶

What are hospitals doing?

Austria

The 18 hospitals of the Vienna Hospitals Association are serving up a 32% organic menu, and between 80 and 90 per cent of the food comes from Austrian producers. Patients enjoy the new meals, which use a lot more fresh produce and fewer processed foods.

Belgium

The Hopital de la Citadelle in Liege sources 95% of its food from Belgian producers – 100% in the case of meat. Salads are now crisp and freshly prepared in-house, while fruit is mainly local and seasonal, supplemented by Fairtrade bananas. Catering spending has been cut by 12% in two years – a saving achieved by using more fresh produce; doing more in-house catering and direct procurement instead of using sub-contractors; and using local suppliers as much as possible.

Denmark

Half the food served in three hospitals in West Zealand is organic, a landmark achieved without an increase in the catering budget. New menus and the use of organic ingredients have made hospital food more appealing to patients, reducing waste in hospitals where €470,000 worth of food used to be left uneaten each year.

Italy

Seventy per cent of food served to children at the New Meyer Hospital in Florence is organically produced. Each patient has an individual food regime, and the hospital's dieticians have worked in consultation with children and their families to develop menus that are both nutritious and appetising. The children have welcomed the changes, expressing appreciation for improvements in taste, quality and variety.

Sweden

All the milk used at Stockholm's Karolinska University Hospital is organic, and all the coffee served on the wards and in the canteen is Fairtrade-certified. The hospital's hamburgers are made in the hospital kitchens using organic minced beef, and locally produced organic fruit is available in fruit bowls on the wards. The hospital has increased its organic sourcing from under 1% to 4% in the first year of its pursuit of a 25% target by the end of 2011.

United Kingdom

The Royal Cornwall Hospitals Trust (RCHT) is spending 41% of its food budget for three hospitals on local produce, and has cut food miles by 67%. London's Royal Brompton Hospital has a menu that is 18% local or organic. In Cornwall the new menus incorporate a lot more fresh vegetables. New, locally-produced ice cream is doing the job of high-energy powdered drinks, saving the RCHT money.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of sustainable food procurement include:

- **Reduced air and water pollution.** Between 30% and 40% of Europeans are exposed to average concentrations of air pollutants that exceed World Health Organisation guidelines⁷. Buying food locally reduces transport emissions, while procuring organic food reduces air and water pollution because pesticide use is highly restricted in organic production.
- **Reduced food miles and greenhouse gas emissions.** Through a switch to local suppliers, one UK hospital trust cut the annual 'food miles' travelled by delivery vehicles by 67%⁸. A study conducted in Germany in 2002 found that organic farming generated only 71 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions per hectare produced by non-organic agriculture⁹.
- **Lower pesticide and antibiotic residues in hospital food.** Pesticide residues were found in 47% of the foods analysed in European Union countries in 2005, with levels in 5% of samples exceeding national government or EU safety levels¹⁰. The World Health Organisation has called for a

reduction in the use of antibiotics in agriculture to protect human health¹¹. Organic food reduces residues of pesticides and antibiotics by severely restricting the use of both.

- **Higher vitamin, mineral, and essential fatty acid content.** A review of 41 comparative studies on crops produced with organic matter and fertilisers found that organic crops had higher average levels of all 21 nutrients analysed¹². A study of lactating women in the Netherlands found that those consuming organic dairy products were producing milk containing higher levels of ruminic acid, which is linked to improved immune function and better resistance to allergies¹³.
- **A boost to local economic well-being.** Buying locally not only benefits local companies directly but also creates a positive ripple effect as suppliers spend what they have gained with other local businesses. Researchers in the UK found that £1 spent with a local organic box scheme ultimately generated £2.59 for the local economy, compared to only £1.40 generated through spending in a local supermarket¹⁴.
- **Increased rural employment.** By procuring organic food hospitals can support a system of farming that is more labour-intensive, helping to boost rural employment and prosperity. Research has established that organic farming in the UK provides 32 per cent more jobs per farm than equivalent non-organic farms¹⁵.
- **Fairer international trade.** Hospitals can help to support sustainable livelihoods for a growing number of communities in developing countries by choosing Fairtrade certified products. Seven million small farmers, farm workers and their families now benefit from the Fairtrade market¹⁶.



Organic milk and freshly made soup are among the foods enjoyed by patients in West Zealand.

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Where can I find out more?

This fact sheet is based on the report *Fresh, Local and Organic*, which contains a fuller, scientifically referenced explanation of the benefits of sustainable food sourcing, together with case studies from eight hospitals across Europe and a step-by-step guide for hospitals that want to establish their own sustainable food initiatives.

See <http://www.noharm.org/europe/food>

For European Union guidance on the legal and practical considerations of sustainable procurement, see the EU action guide *Buying Green!* at http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/buying_green_handbook_en.pdf

There is a good example of model contract specification clauses for sustainable food procurement at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/pdf/psfpi-clauses.pdf>

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- 3 *Our Common Future – Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. New York: United Nations, 1987.
- 4 *A Better Quality of Life – Strategy for Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom*. London: HM Stationery Office, 1999.
- 5 *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World – A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development*. COM (2001) 264 final. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, 2001.
- 6 *Unlocking Opportunities: Lifting the Lid on Public Sector Food Procurement*. London: Defra, 2003.
- 7 *A Breath of Fresh Air* fact sheet. Brussels: European Federation on Transport and Environment, 2002.
- 8 Russell, C. *A Fresh Approach to Hospital Food*. Bristol: Soil Association, 2007.
- 9 Flessa H, Ruser R, Dorsch P, Kamp T, Jimenez MA, Munch JC, Beese F (2002). 'Integrated evaluation of greenhouse gas emissions from two farming systems in southern Germany'. *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 91, 175-189.
- 10 *Monitoring of Pesticide Residues in Products of Plant Origin in the European Union, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein*. SEC (2007) 1411. Commission of the European Communities, 2007.
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- 16 'Seven million farming families benefit as global Fairtrade sales increase by 40%'. Fairtrade Foundation press release, July 2007.

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