

# **The Social and Nutritional Impact of Meals-on-Wheels: Attitudes of Recipients towards the Service**

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# Outline of Presentation

- Context: Previous Research
- Background
- Findings from Interviews with Recipients:  
Relationship with MOW as food and as 'social service'
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

# Older People and Food

- Physiological reasons for poor nutritional status among older people: poor dentition, loss of tastebuds, limited mobility.
- Change in personal circumstances can alter relationship with food and meaning of mealtimes, e.g. bereavement, loneliness (Shahar et al, 2001; Sidenvall et al, 2000).

# Services and Older People

- Individuals react differently to their own ageing: rejection of ageing process, making the best of the situation or delight in new possibilities (Bullington, 2006).
- Vulnerable older people's use of services may be effected by negative feelings about the ageing process (Gooberman-Hill and Ebrahim, 2007).

## Background

- Interviews with 63 meals recipients
- Accessed through over 20 providers
- Attitudes towards meals-on-wheels:
  - as a food service
  - as a social service
- Factors affecting their attitudes?

## Findings: 4 Typologies

- Resistant eaters
- Accepting eaters
- Bereaved eaters
- Functional eaters
  - *Analysed in relation to the 2 functions of MOW:*
    - Relationship with MOW as food
    - Relationship with MOW as ‘social service’

## Resistant Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as Food

- Reluctant or unenthusiastic to start on meals-on-wheels, highlight its shortcomings. Many ‘personalise’ the meal:

*Well I nearly always use the stuff that they send me and make it into something else, cook it up into something with a bit of flavour...*

(Female recipient, aged 83)

## Resistant Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as ‘Social Service’

- Disengagement:

*Sometimes I'm out when they call.*

(Female recipient, aged 85)

# Accepting Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as Food

- Positive relationship with (MOW) food and continue to make an effort to enjoy mealtimes:

*I normally eat in the kitchen. I'm happy here because I can see out...see people going by all the time... Because I find it lonely...since I had a big family... And I'm not as lonely when I can see everything.*

(Female recipient, aged 82)

## Accepting Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as 'Social Service'

- Source of meaningful social contact:

*When I decided to go down to the three days I couldn't decide which day to drop, because it would mean losing one of the drivers, and they're all so nice, I found it hard to decide!*

(Female recipient, aged 85)

## Bereaved Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as Food

- Receiving meals-on-wheels appeared to reinforce this sense of loss:

*The poor aul' wife...she was a first class cook...  
Food is not the same if you're not getting it home  
cooked you know...*

(Male recipient, aged 87)

## Bereaved Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as 'Social Service'

- Source of Security:

*[They] came with my dinner... but, I couldn't get up, and I was sitting there at that door, all the doors were open, the television was on, the lights were on since the night before, I said "I can't get up". I was frightened... I was worn out and I think I had kind of laid down during the night... but if that had happened me out there [in the kitchen] I mean I would have banged my head off the concrete... do you know...?*

(Female recipient, aged 86)

# Functional Eaters: Meals-on-Wheels as Food

- Functional eaters never had a meaningful relationship with food, but rather “ate to live”, resulting in poor eating habits. Many were ‘grateful’ for meals-on-wheels, and felt it helped control what they ate:

*Maybe at times, I know if was doing it on my own I might eat more potatoes and things like that you know, the things maybe that I shouldn't be eating you know.*

(Male recipient, aged 81)

# Functional Eaters: MOW as 'Social Service'

- Detachment:

*I don't like to [delay driver] and I have the door nearly open and I have a tray. And he does be delighted with me, I never delay him.*

(Male recipient, aged 87)

## Conclusions

- Meals-on-wheels play an important role in helping older people to remain living at home but can remind recipients of the loss of independence they face.
- Can be difficult to remain positive about food when it acts as a constant reminder of ageing process and loss of independence; nutritional status and use of services of some individuals may be negatively affected.
- Meals-on-wheels not reaching its full potential if providers don't recognise its social role.

## Recommendations

- **Services need to recognise the psychological shift that meals-on-wheels recipients undergo when starting on the service; need for high quality meals and more client input.**
- **Training needed for delivery staff/volunteers to enhance the social aspects of meals-on-wheels.**
- **Ancillary services need for maintaining independence, e.g. accompanied shopping, training in basic food preparation.**

## References

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