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).
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)
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)
[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)
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


