

Introduction of Healthy Choices at Alfred Health food outlets

Evaluation summary

This evaluation summary is part of a broader project which aims to assess the health costs and benefits of implementing healthy eating policies in two key public settings – healthcare, and sport and recreation facilities.

Introduction

In 2012, Alfred Health introduced a healthy food and beverage policy in food outlets, vending machines and catering at three sites. The objective of this evaluation is to:

- assess the costs and benefits of implementing the policy by analysing the perception of key stakeholders in the process
- analyse changes in sales of food and drinks
- analyse changes in the type of food purchased according to the classification outlined in the Victorian Government's *Healthy Choices: food and drink guidelines for Victorian public hospitals* (DHHS 2013).

The *Healthy Choices: food and drink classification guide* (DHHS 2015) uses a traffic light system to classify food and beverages as 'green' (best choice), 'amber' (choose carefully) or 'red' (limit intake). While the policy was applied throughout Alfred Health, this report focusses on one food outlet and the changes made across vending machines on one site.

The evaluation of Alfred Health's changes fills a gap in knowledge about the impact of healthy choice strategies from the perspective of the retailer. As the changes to the food outlets were multiple they will not be described in detail here, however the information can be found at <http://heas.health.vic.gov.au/healthy-choices/case-studies/alfred-health>

This summary concludes with a number of useful recommendations for organisations planning to undertake similar policy changes to improve population health.

The evaluation of Alfred Health's trial was carried out by Deakin University, with funding from VicHealth. For more information and additional resources, visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/easychoice

Methodology

A mixed method approach was used to describe and analyse implementation of the Healthy Choices policy by Alfred Health, as well as analyse the effect on healthy and unhealthy food and drink sales.

Qualitative research was used to explore factors related to implementation of the policy across both vending and food retail outlets. A range of people involved in the implementation of the Healthy Choices policy were selected for unstructured, in-depth interviews.

The stakeholders interviewed included:

- food outlet owner
- head chef
- administrative assistant for the food outlet
- external food supplier to food outlet owner
- health promotion manager within Alfred Health
- dietitian involved in implementation
- procurement manager within Alfred Health
- Alfred Health CEO.

Quantitative research was used to describe the effect of the policy on sales from the vending machines. Itemised sales data was provided by the vending supplier to the health service sites, and aggregate sales data was used. This indicated the number of items sold and total dollar sales for each food and drink item sold by month between September 2009 and March 2013. This represented sales three years prior to and one year post implementation of the policy. Analysis of the sales trends was used to estimate the difference in the number of items sold and dollar sales pre- and post-policy implementation.



AlfredHealth



Key findings

The key findings of the research have been divided into:

- **Retail** – covering the experience of policy implementation for food outlets
- **Vending** – establishing the effects of the policy implementation on vending sales.

Retail findings

The retail findings are the result of qualitative research and a number of themes were identified during the interviews, as seen below.

Enablers

There were a number of approaches to policy implementation that were consistently identified by interviewees as contributing to the success of the project. These included:

- approaching the changes with patience
- taking a long-term perspective
- providing ongoing support for the retailer
- long-term relationships between stakeholders.

“

We had a great relationship with [the food outlet owner]. He was really passionate and became more passionate about it as he could see people engaged in a process and he could see how he was actually impacting on people's health.”

Dietitian

Existing characteristics within Alfred Health were also identified as enablers of the Healthy Choices implementation process. Firstly, the retailers' buying power provided the opportunity for negotiation with current suppliers to modify products, and if this wasn't possible, new suppliers could be engaged to meet the need for healthier products. In addition, a consistent message about the importance of ensuring a healthy food environment at The Alfred was supported and broadcast by the CEO and resonated with stakeholders at all levels of the organisation.

“

We had a responsibility to contribute to wellbeing as well as improving ill health.”

Alfred Health CEO

“

...it should be a healthier place to eat, the hospital.”

External supplier

The availability of hospital dietitians to classify foods and provide advice, as well as support from the hospital's health promotion manager, were seen as crucial to the success of the process. The importance of building and maintaining relationships emerged again; and key to this was the development of trust between the retailer, health promotion manager and dietitian. Relationships between the retail staff and customers were also seen as important, and provided

the opportunity to support customers to try new, healthier products. The implementation was carried out in small, manageable steps and this was perceived as critical to its success. Finally, retailers were motivated by public recognition of their efforts.

“

...when you hear that from the CEO, 'I love what they're doing down there. I love the changes.' You've got to be doing something right.”

Head chef

Practical strategies for the food retailer

A key focus for the retailer was to provide healthy, high quality, tasty food without adverse effects on sales. To do this, trialling new products or strategies (for example, 'red' drinks off display) for a short time emerged as a safe way to experiment with changes without risking financial loss. Once these were seen to have no impact on overall purchases, they were often implemented long term.

The strategies employed included decreasing portion sizes; increasing the range of salads, sushi and yoghurt; reducing fried food; moving sugar-sweetened beverages out of sight; pricing healthy foods lower; substituting healthy for unhealthy foods and drinks.

“

We did lots of two week blocks in the end, six months' worth... those results were... positive... It's made him... very prepared to do other things...”

Health promotion manager

Challenges and solutions

There were initial concerns that the changes might not be effective, or that they could result in reduced customer sales and potential financial loss. Extra time and effort required to source new ingredients, train staff and persuade customers were also seen as challenges by the retailer. In addition, the Healthy Choices guidelines were seen as complex and the advice of dietitians was needed to assess the menu.

Many strategies were used to overcome these challenges. Initial skepticism was overcome by short-term trials; feeding relevant information back to the retailer in real-time, and constant communication between all stakeholders. Any queries from customers or suppliers were responded to using the CEO's clear message that the hospital should be selling healthy food and beverages. A consistent finding was that while initially changes were difficult to make, these became easier over time, and were more widely accepted amongst customers and staff as the culture shifted.

“

[The food outlet owner tells me] [h]ow hard it is for him to know what is 'green' and 'red' and how can he get some answers...you're looking at easy, quicker, faster ways of actually doing this sort of stuff.”

Health promotion manager

Outcomes

The switch from unhealthy to healthier food and drink options including salads, sushi, fruits, yoghurts, waters and sugar-free flavoured waters was the key result of the policy implementation identified by all participants. In addition, the changes were not perceived to have impacted negatively on sales. Many of the stakeholders also noted that it made them personally feel good to have a positive impact on people's food choices.

“

...you see someone, for example, who's big on their dim sims, big on their Coke, and now they're having a salad and a water.”

Head chef

“

Business, I would say, has improved. Which is quite a shock... I'm rapt, it's good.”

Head chef

Advice to others

Participants reflected on additional strategies they would recommend to other retailers considering similar changes. The input of a dietitian was very important and communication across the health service was identified as integral to the process, whether it was from the head chef to the staff and customers, or from the CEO to the health promotion manager. The food outlet owner recommended that a co-operative would enable retailers to purchase healthy products at affordable rates, and a training facility would enable businesses to learn from each other about healthy food provision.

“

...being there to answer their questions in a timely manner, knowing they can pick up the phone and ask you a question... they're important.”

Dietitian

Stakeholder motivations

Participants identified different motivators for engaging in the implementation of the Healthy Choices policy. These included:

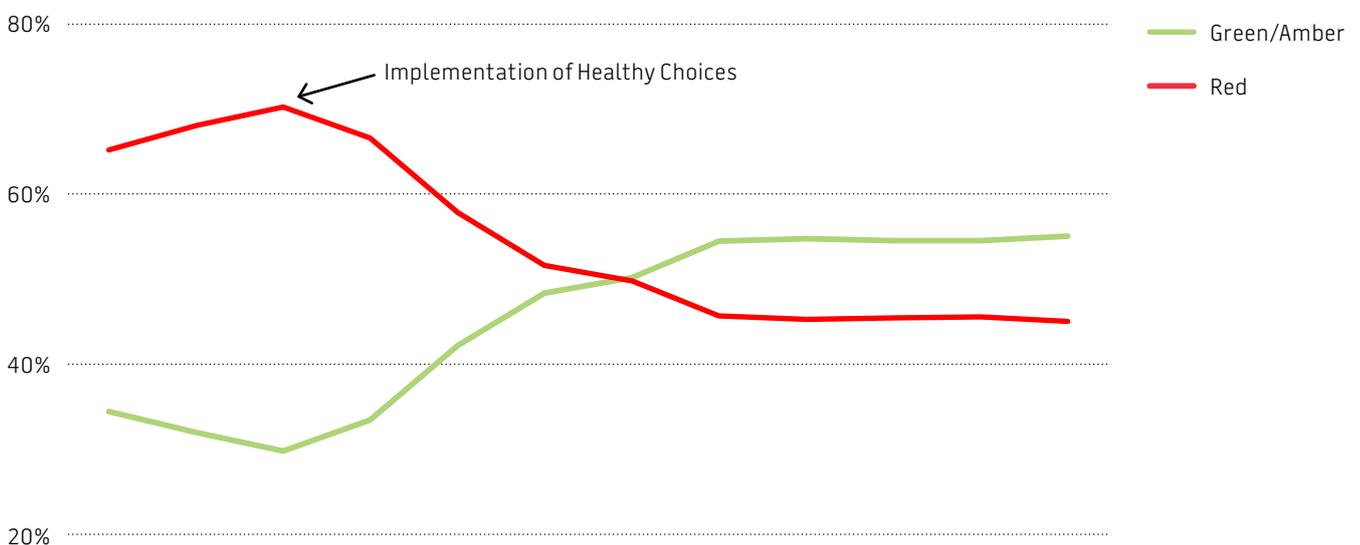
- being motivated by the passion of other stakeholders
- a shared vision for contributing to preventive health
- the importance of a health service to lead the way in healthy food provision.

The food outlet owner also identified new foods as a point of difference for his business, and his relationships with the health service were also a motivator. The head chef had a clear motivation for keeping his customers satisfied, as well as being recognised by the CEO for doing his job well.

Vending findings

Analysis of sales data from the vending machines pre- and post-implementation of the policy showed that the intended health outcome of the policy was met, with a large decrease in sales of 'red' food and drinks and an increase in the sales of healthier items. There was a decrease in the total number of items sold after implementation of the policy, but the vending supplier reported a coinciding drop in sales statewide. Fortunately, during the policy implementation, Alfred Health negotiated a higher commission per item with the supplier, which offset the financial impact of lower sales.

Proportion of total sales (%) by product classification



Conclusion

Alfred Health has been able to achieve its target of providing healthier food and beverage options to its patients, staff and broader community through its Healthy Choices policy. This was achieved through a long-term approach, which depended on strong relationships, gradual change and clear communication. The success of the process was the result of a strategy which included responsive resourcing; small reversible steps and recognition of success across the organisation.

The most important finding is that increased availability of healthier options improved business for the retail outlets. In addition, a decrease in vending sales was offset by the negotiation of a higher commission per item by Alfred Health. This is complemented by the unquantifiable, but important, sense of pride the stakeholders have in the knowledge that they are making a contribution to preventing risk factors to the health of patients, staff and visitors to the hospital.

Recommendations

It will be critical to continue to identify the range of different motivators; build measurement tools and develop systems for other organisations to use, based on the experiences of Alfred Health and similar organisations.

A number of specific recommendations emerged:

- Communicate clear, consistent messaging across the organisation about the need for healthy choices.
- Assign sufficient resources to support and advise stakeholders.
- Build and maintain trusting relationships between stakeholders.
- Use small, reversible, short-term trials to develop trust of retailers.
- Support a cyclical feedback loop of short trials where processes can be refined to make them sustainable for the retailer and organisation.
- Make use of buying power to renegotiate contracts.
- Identify internal and external recognition opportunities to inspire and reward stakeholders.
- Develop expert networks to help retailers identify healthy and unhealthy products and share strategies that work, such as recipe books of healthy options popular with customers.

References

Department of Health and Human Services 2013, *Healthy Choices: food and drink guidelines for Victorian public hospitals*, viewed 14 October 2016, <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals-and-health-services/quality-safety-service/healthy-choices>>.

Department of Health and Human Services 2015, *Healthy Choices: food and drink classification guide*, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.



Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
vichealth.vic.gov.au



VicHealth acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

© VicHealth 2016
November 2016 P-HE-422

