



Farm-to-Hospital

On-Site Farms Grow Organics for Patients

by Judith Fertig

Most people would agree with the results of a 2011 study by the nonprofit Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine: Typical hospital food is full of the dietary fat, sodium, calories, cholesterol and sugar that contribute to the medical problems that land many in the hospital in the first place. The study's dietitians further found that some hospitals house up to five fast-food outlets.

Because studies from institutions

such as the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the University of Maryland show that a poor diet contributes to a host of illnesses and longer recovery time after surgery—all of which increase healthcare costs—it befits hospitals to embrace healthier eating. Now, a dozen pioneering hospitals have their own on-site farms and others are partnering with local farms, embracing new ways to help us eat healthier, especially those that most need to heal.

“In a paradigm shift, hospitals are realizing the value of producing fresh, local, organic food for their patients,” says Mark Smallwood, executive director of the nonprofit Rodale Institute, in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. It recently partnered with St. Luke’s University Hospital, in nearby Bethlehem, to help support operations of the hospital’s 10-acre organic farm that yields 30 varieties of vegetables and fruits served in hospital meals to support patient recovery. New mothers are sent home

with baskets of fresh produce to help instill healthy eating habits.

“Organic fruits and vegetables offer many advantages over conventionally grown foods,” says Dr. Bonnie Coyle, director of community health for St. Luke’s University Health Network. She cites the higher amounts of vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and antioxidants as contributing to a reduced incidence of heart disease and some cancers and a lowered risk for other common conditions such as allergies, and hyperactivity in children.

Hospital farms also benefit the environment and facilitate other healing ways. Saint Joseph Mercy Health System Ann Arbor’s hospital farm, created in 2010 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is a win-win-win solution. “We can model the connection between food and health to our patients, visitors, staff and community,” says hospital spokesperson Laura Blodgett. Their Health Care Without Harm pledge commits the hospital to providing local, nutritious and sustainable food.

The farm repurposed some of the hospital’s 340-acre campus, eliminating

considerable lawn mowing and chemicals. Today, its organic produce also supplies an on-site farmers’ market. Most recently, collaboration with a rehab hospital treating traumatic brain injuries resulted in a solar-heated greenhouse to continually produce organic food using raised beds and a Ferris-wheel-style planting system that enables patients to experience gardening as agritherapy. “Patients love the hands-on healing of tending the garden,” says Blodgett.

Another innovative hospital is Watertown Regional Medical Center, in rural Wisconsin. Its farm, located behind the 90-bed hospital, raises 60 pesticide-free crops a year, including vegetables, herbs and even edible flowers. “We believe that food is medicine,” says Executive Chef Justin Johnson. He also serves his healthier fare to the public via special dinners in the hospital’s café, celebrating spring and fall harvests.

In Arcata, California, Mad River Community Hospital’s designated farmer, Isaiah Webb, tills six plots and two greenhouses to supply organic carrots, beets, tomatoes, basil, potatoes, sweet corn, artichokes, squash, pumpkins,

lettuce, blueberries, apples and strawberries to patients and guests. An in-house work/share program encourages hospital employees to volunteer gardening time for a share of the produce.

A three-way partnership of the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, Fletcher Allen Health Care and Central Vermont Medical Center, all in the Burlington area, combines community supported agriculture (CSA) and physicians’ prescriptions for healthier eating. Diane Imrie, director of nutrition services at Fletcher Allen, comments, “If we want to have a ‘well’ community, they have to be well fed.” Paid student farmers from 15 to 21 years old grow and harvest eight acres of fruits and vegetables for selected doctor-recommended patients in the 12-week-growing season program. Patients gain an appreciation of healthy eating that remains with them, thus decreasing their need for acute medical care.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farm-to-institution programs like these both provide healthy food to hospital patients and help develop sustainable regional food systems. We all benefit from such healing ripples in the healthcare pond.

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Spring is God’s way of saying, ‘One more time!’

– ROBERT ORBEN
