Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink: the challenge of bottled water provision to older users in hospitals

Alison Bell\textsuperscript{a}, Karen Walton\textsuperscript{b}, Linda Tapsell\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Health & Society, University of Wollongong, NSW, AUSTRALIA; \textsuperscript{b}School of Medicine, University of Wollongong, NSW, AUSTRALIA; \textsuperscript{c}School of Medicine, University of Wollongong, NSW, AUSTRALIA.

1. Abstract

Food and beverage packaging has been found to contribute to malnutrition amongst the older hospital patient. Reliance on bottled water as a hydration source for hospital patients is a growing phenomenon. This paper examines the interaction of the older user and bottled water packaging supplied in NSW hospitals. Findings demonstrate that water bottles are among the most difficult packs to open by older users and require high levels of hand strength. The provision of plastic bottled water in hospitals needs to be evaluated for system effectiveness: hydration intake, user experience and cost effectiveness.

2. Summary

Public hospitals in NSW rely heavily on packaged food and beverages for food service provision. Bell et al. (2013) identified that hospitalised older people have particular ‘openability’ issues with the products served to them in NSW public hospitals. A review of NSW hospitals by Garling (2008) reported that 48% of inpatients in NSW were over the age of 65 years, although they represented 14% of the total population. As the population ages, this over-representation of older people in hospital will increase rapidly. Additionally, malnutrition amongst the elderly is well recognised and has been termed ‘starvation in the midst of plenty’, costing the UK 10% of the health budget (BAPEN, 2006), twice the cost of obesity related disease.

This paper outlines a series of 3 studies undertaken with well people aged 65 years and over in NSW Australia examining their interaction with routine hospital water bottles.

Methodology included quantitative measures of hand and pinch strength and time to open the bottles in 2 postures (seated and lying); and qualitative measures of ease of use and interview.

The findings demonstrate that bottled water packaging is difficult for older people to open and time taken to open is closely correlated with aspects of hand and pinch strength.

These studies represent ‘best case scenario’ of the older population in that the participants were ‘well’ and independently living in the community and able to volunteer for the study. Conversely, hospitalised older people are ‘unwell’ and can be malnourished. The implications of relying on packaged water as a hydration source in hospital needs to be further evaluated in terms actual intake of water, user experience and system cost effectiveness.

References


NSW Government.
