

## FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens

Ursula has a degree in dietetics and currently works as a freelance writer in Nutrition and Dietetics. She enjoys the gifts of Asperger's.

Our F2F interviews feature people who influence nutrition policies and practices in the UK.

**Ursula meets:****MAXINE CARTZ**

Vice-Chair, BDA Food Services Specialist Group (FSSG)

Company Dietitian, Medirest (Healthcare division of Compass Group)



Food is sometimes the afterthought in hospital medical care, but perhaps more discussed and debated and can be a battleground between caterers and dietitians, patients and their relatives, hospital budget holders and celebrity chefs and media foodies . . . and many others. So, it is a great privilege to meet 'multilingual' Maxine Cartz, who translates fluently between the many professional groups considering hospital food. "I love being able to influence discussions to get better decisions," she says.

Maxine attributes her career choice entirely to former Shawlands Academy teacher Miss Craig. "She was my chemistry tutor and the school careers adviser. She surprised me with the word 'dietitian' when I gave her my impossible wish list of vocational jobs incorporating medicine, science and food."

Graduating from The Queen's College, Glasgow (now Glasgow Caledonian University) in 1984, she got her first job in London at the private Cromwell Hospital. The dietetic services contract was managed by a catering company, so from the start, Maxine had insights into the practicalities of menu development and hospital meal production.

The arrival of her two children, now in their thirties, meant that part-time employment became more attractive, and Maxine enjoyed a few years working in health promotion and GP clinics. In 1994, she was delighted to

get a catering dietitian job at St Mary's Hospital, London. The kitchen was home, and Maxine planned menus, performed nutrition analysis and dietary coding, trained kitchen and support staff and liaised with clinical colleagues. "Some called me the 'diet police' because I did a weekly fridge check. It was a great frustration that expensive specialist feeds and supplements had to be discarded because nobody informed the kitchen of cancellations and patient discharges," said Maxine. She smiles when I wonder whether better communication systems today lead to less waste.

In 1999, Maxine became company dietitian for another catering company. She advised on the catering contracts of many hospitals. "I loved being the influencer to get better food to more people," she said. At that point, Maxine was involved in staff training, quality control and menu development. I imagined that she always had a spoon in her pocket, but "only during the twice-a-year new menu tastings," she admitted.

Maxine has been in her current job as company dietitian for Medirest, the Healthcare division of Compass Group UK and Ireland, since 2004. We talk about the different food production systems used in hospitals. Foods cooked on site. Foods cooked off site and reheated and plated in kitchens. Foods trolley-delivered and plated on the wards. And had I heard of Steampticity? "It's a patented system



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of mixed precooked and raw foods that can be cooked in microwaves on ward kitchens," she explained. "The near-to-patient preparation means that foods are fresh and of great quality, and the system allows some flexibility in delivery times, to accommodate protected mealtimes and patients' requirements."

There have been several high-level reviews of NHS hospital food systems and Maxine, along with fellow FSSG committee member, Lauren Bowen, was the dietitian representative on the most recent report, issued in October 2020. *Bake Off* judge, Prue Leith, was the independent advisor on the panel and supported media comment on publication. "We did a lot to communicate the challenges of hospital meal preparations," said Maxine. "So imagine a restaurant where diners were ill and on very tight budgets and in many locations far away from kitchens."

Their review recommended that food service should be an essential part of the dietetic syllabus, and that nutrition and hydration training should be mandatory for other hospital professionals, including existing doctors' continuing professional development. It also recommended the provision of food service dietitians in every Trust for at least one day per week in small hospitals (up to 500 beds) or full-time posts in large hospitals of 2000+ beds. More funding was recommended too, for improved data-collection methods on nutrition in all hospital settings. The review estimated that the NHS should create 75 new posts to ensure the greater role of food service dietitians (with an estimated cost of £4 million).

We discuss the BDA Food Services Specialist Group (FSSG), as Maxine has held several positions on their committee over the years, recently retiring as Chair and moving to Vice-

Chair. The group has 130+ members who work in all areas of food service, but perhaps mostly in healthcare. It is explosively productive, including publishing *The Nutrition and Hydration Digest*, a 230-page tome providing an immensely detailed description and national reference for catering within hospitals. *The Digest* allows food services dietitians a solid steel pole to hold onto when debates on hospital foods develop. The FSSG is currently working on the third update to be launched next year.

Of course, hospital menus evolve to reflect changes in food culture. More exotic foods; more plant foods: perhaps more cous-cous and tofu burgers? There have been many celebrity chef suggestions for more adventurous menus, but Maxine insists that most of the time, people want comforting and familiar foods. "We review menus twice a year, but traditional favourites remain. Cottage pie and roast dinners will always stay popular."

Do friends and family share their hospital food experiences with her? "Indeed. Only last week the father of a friend shared a complaint. He told me the cherry tomatoes were difficult to cut. But if that was the worst offence, then hospital food must be doing really well!" she laughed.

The constant anxiety for hospital caterers is being again and again the department for cuts when there is hospital budget shrinkage. "Food is an essential part of treatment for all patients, and must be resourced as such," said Maxine. I hoped, in accordance with the Hospital Food Review issued last year, that Maxine would soon be able to welcome 75 new food service dietitian colleagues into the world of healthcare catering. But she would always be one of the original pioneers and chief influencers of UK hospital food.