Improving the Dysphagia Experience

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The importance of nutrition for hospital patients cannot be overestimated; it aids wound healing, helps reduce falls due to loss of strength/muscle mass, reduces incidences of pressure ulcers and helps to reduce length of stay.\(^1\) However, achieving adequate nutrition in hospital can be challenging with many different obligations vying for priority on a hospital ward.\(^2\) In addition, certain medical conditions can make meeting a person’s nutritional needs even more difficult. Dysphagia or swallowing difficulties is one such condition and its impact on a person can be significant.

In an acute hospital it is estimated that 15% of all inpatients are affected by dysphagia,\(^3\) this number can be as high as 50% of people with acute stroke\(^4\) and up to 74% of nursing home residents.\(^3\)

Dysphagia is not a condition limited to older patients; it can occur as a result of a number of conditions across the lifespan, including learning disabilities or head and neck cancers.\(^5,6\) For some people, dysphagia will resolve as their associated medical condition improves, however for many dysphagia will be a permanent and lifelong condition.

Dysphagia can have a number of significant adverse consequences and complications for the individual, as outlined in the figure below:

![Figure 1: Consequences of dysphagia\(^7\)](image)

One management strategy recommended for people with the diagnosis of dysphagia is to follow a texture-modified diet.\(^8\) This type of diet can involve thickening drinks and/or modifying the consistency of food to varying degrees, as recommended by a speech and language therapist. Changing the consistency of foods and fluids can help the individual to control the food and/or fluids more safely during the swallowing process.\(^9\)

Although this type of diet has been shown to be safer for individuals with dysphagia,\(^10,11\) it can have an impact on the person’s quality of life,\(^12,13\) an aspect that no healthcare professional should forget.

Historically, a traditional starch-based thickening agent has been used in my acute hospital Trust. This type of
thickening agent has been in commercial use for dysphagic patients for a number of years\textsuperscript{11} however it is not without its drawbacks. Starch-based thickeners are known to react differently with different types of liquids, to continue to thicken over time and can have an unappealing appearance.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to this, starch-based thickeners are sensitive to salivary amylase - an enzyme found in saliva which can begin to break down the starch in the mouth and thin the liquid.\textsuperscript{15} This is a risk as it can mean that patients do not always receive a drink at the recommended consistency.

A meeting with our new local Nutricia Representative was an opportunity to review the current product and it was during this meeting that we were introduced to Nutilis Clear, a gum-based thickening agent. Gum-based thickening agents are a new generation of thickeners that have many improved properties – clearer appearance, improved stability and, perhaps most importantly, amylase resistance features.\textsuperscript{16} This meeting gave us the opportunity to see the new product and opened our eyes to a potential way of improving our patients’ experiences. The guidelines for mixing our previous thickener did not lend themselves to easy mixing, by stating a range of scoops for each stage within the guidelines, i.e. 2-3 scoops for Stage 1 and 3-4 scoops for Stage 2 etc. In our experience, this ambiguity increased the risk of staff preparing a drink which was too thick and no longer the recommended consistency. This in turn could lead to patients drinking less and having an increased risk of dehydration. As a Trust we had no significant reports of any problems with the thickening agent we were using and so it would have been easy to have left things as they were. However, we also knew that many such errors could go unnoticed and as such unreported. Conversely, the guidelines for Nutilis Clear are simple, 1 scoop for Stage 1 and 2 scoops for Stage 2 etc. and therefore it was apparent that there would be a number of improvements if we changed to this new product.

Nutricia helped in many ways with the change process, they produced a cost comparison chart and posters, and offered to help with the changeover of products on the wards. Additionally, we felt that education would be a key part of the change process as it is known that involving ward staff in change is a helpful approach to engaging staff in changing practice.\textsuperscript{17} We targeted key staff groups that are involved in the delivery of nutrition and hydration to patients on the wards – Registered Nurses, Health Care Assistants and Ward Housekeepers. We opted for a mix of both classroom and ward sessions that were attended by a mix of staff giving people a chance to learn from each other. Teaching sessions were carried out by a Speech and Language Therapist and Nursing staff with the support of Nutricia Representatives.

Positive outcomes from the introduction of Nutilis Clear were seen surprisingly quickly, with both staff and patients giving positive feedback the day of introduction. Previously patients and their families would comment about having to have “wallpaper paste” drinks and unappetising drinks can have a detrimental effect on patient’s oral fluid intake.\textsuperscript{9} The verbal feedback on the day was very positive with both staff and patients mentioning the improved appearance and taste. We collected verbal feedback from staff, patients and families
and also produced a short questionnaire so we could compare our previous thickening agent to Nutilis Clear. Details of the results from the staff questionnaire can be seen in the table below:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gum-based</th>
<th>Starch-based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% very easy to thicken drinks</td>
<td>40% very easy or easy to thicken drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92% no problems with mixing</td>
<td>65% drinks often become lumpy during mixing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88% reported no change to thickness of drinks over time</td>
<td>100% reported changes to thickness of drinks over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85% easy or very easy to thicken foods</td>
<td>100% difficult or very difficult to thicken foods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Patient Centred Care**

‘Good coordination between the hospital and the home or community is needed when patients are transferred between settings’

The above quote, from The Kings Fund, highlights the next step of our work; we decided to go on to look at our discharge process for dysphagic patients. Previously, when we discharged patients on a thickening agent we generally sent them with a copy of the Speech and Language Therapist’s recommendations and any supporting advice from the ward staff. We felt that it would be beneficial to offer patients and/or their families more information on their diagnosis and why they were being discharged on a thickening agent. We compared the information we supplied to patients post bowel surgery with a new stoma or new diabetics with the information supplied to our patients with dysphagia. The first two patient groups receive information and supportive leaflets from companies who provide products or services to support with those diagnoses. It was clear that patients with dysphagia and their families could similarly benefit from receiving written information that they could refer to after discharge. To facilitate this, Nutricia shared with us some of their Nutilis Clear supporting information and patient leaflets.

To implement this, we currently have a trial of a discharge home support bag for all patients that are being discharged from the Trust on Nutilis Clear. The full contents of the bag are listed below:-

**Nutilis Clear discharge home bags**

- Dysphagia information booklets
- Nutilis Clear guide
- Shaker
- Cup
- Tub of Nutilis Clear

This trial is currently ongoing with the support of Nutricia and we are following all patients supplied with the Nutilis Clear Discharge Home Bags with a short telephone questionnaire to gauge their thoughts on the bag.

The diagnosis of dysphagia is never given lightly as it can have a profound impact on the patient. Patients that need to follow a modified consistency diet due to dysphagia can find that it has a negative impact on their quality of life. For the majority of us eating and drinking is an enjoyable part of life and a dysphagia diet can deprive people of this enjoyment. However, dysphagia should not be a disabling condition and one that isolates people due to fear of choking and embarrassment. Anything that we can do as healthcare professionals that can help support and improve the quality of life for our patients whilst in our care and post discharge should be implemented.

**References**

Which one would you choose?

- Choose your thickener with clarity
- Collaborate with us for your dysphagia training needs
- To receive your Dysphagia Working Pack contact resourcecentre@nutricia.com

SUPPORTING YOU TO SUPPORT YOUR PATIENTS