Creating Vidant Health’s Healthy Food Environment

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INTRODUCTION
Long before the Institute of Medicine released its report on solving the obesity epidemic in our nation (IOM, 2012), Vidant Medical Center and then all Vidant Hospitals made a concerted effort to increase access to healthier food and beverage options for all its employees. The 2012 IOM report includes a goal for governments and decision makers in the business community/private sector to create food and beverage environments that reduce unhealthy food and beverage options while increasing healthier food and beverage options at affordable, competitive prices, that is—ensure that the healthy choice is the easy choice. Vidant’s efforts began in the 1980s but in earnest in 2003 (Figure 1). In earlier issues of Perspectives on Patient Care we described the Eat Smart Move More North Carolina movement and Vidant Medical Center’s leadership role in defining healthy food environments (Kolasa, Poole, Chatman et al, 2005; Kolasa, Gaskins, Dial et al, 2006; and Kolasa, Currie, Dial et al, 2009). When we began the journey to create a healthy food environment, there was no road-map or national standard to guide the effort. And although many groups like the American Heart Association (Gidding, 2009), the American Cancer Society (Kushi, 2012), and the Institute of Medicine (2012) are calling for the creation of environments that support individual efforts to achieve and maintain a healthy weight, there is still no single best path. For example, some hospitals have chosen to remove all fryers or eliminate all sugar sweetened beverages or have meatless days (Gidding, 2009; Health Care without Harm, 2012). Vidant Health has adopted strategies that provide healthy and affordable choices while retaining personal choice. This paper describes the rationale behind the efforts that have made Vidant Health a national leader in this arena (Kolasa and Thornhill, 2011; CDC, 2011, Gaskins 2012).

HEALTHY DINING SINCE 2003

Vidant Medical Center has been a leader in creating a healthy food environment since 2003 when it first joined the Winners Circle Healthy Dining Program. By 2005 in its main cafeteria, nutrition information was available at point of purchase and a “healthy meal of the day” was featured and available during all shifts. In 2008 Vidant Medical Center was among the first Centers of Excellence in the NC Prevention Partners/North Carolina Hospital Association’s (NCPP) healthy food environment program. Vidant Health was a key player in helping shape this program, which was awarded a Healthy Living Innovation Award from US Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius in 2011 in recognition of this cutting edge work in health promotion that helped hospitals across North Carolina change the way they prepare, serve and market food to staff and visitors.
In an effort to make the healthy choice the easy to find choice, the "Pick Well Live Well" icon was used throughout the hospital system and identified foods meeting a healthy criteria (Table 1). The icon was selected by a vote of employees from several developed by the marketing department in 2010. By 2011 all Vidant Health hospitals had earned "red apple status" from the NCPP program, recognizing that they met the five standards of 1) provide access to healthy foods; 2) use pricing structure to incentivize customers to purchase healthy items; 3) use marketing techniques to promote healthy foods; 4) use benefit design and/or wellness incentives to encourage behavior change; and 5) implement education campaign to promote the healthy food environment with staff and visitors. While meeting these standards, our best estimate was that less than 40% of foods and beverages sold on the Vidant campuses were "healthy". To ensure that the healthy choice was the easy choice for employees and visitors, more needed to be done.

**The ECHI Opportunity**

East Carolina Heart Institute (ECHI) opened with a café promising that most of the food and beverages served in that venue would meet a heart health promoting criteria. This was a unique opportunity to explore what it would really take to create an eatery or café that meets the goals of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (USDA, 2010) and the science based recommendations for heart healthy eating. A committee that included dietitians as well as food service professionals created the Guiding Principles for the ECHI eatery. The ECHI café and its vending achieved the goal of providing a food environment where healthy was the norm rather than the exception. There were and continue to be obstacles to maintaining this type of food environment such as lack of food products that qualify, accurate ingredient measurements and consistent portion control, the financial concerns of the food service operator and of the Service League of Greenville, and customer morale. Since we do not have the scientific evidence to prove that these "costs" exceed the health "benefits" these standards have not been extended to all Vidant Health food environments. The ECHI café remains a popular eatery as well as a nutrition education laboratory for employees, patients and visitors to the Heart Center.

The food market place and consumer preferences are changing and at some time in the future the ECHI café model may be applied to all eateries in the Vidant Health system. Until then, members of the Nutrition Initiative continued to study what type of food environment would positively affect the health and wellbeing of Vidant employees and visitors.
**Red Apple Hospitals**

By 2011 most Vidant Health hospitals had earned “red apple status” from the NCPP program, recognizing that they met the five standards of 1) provide access to healthy foods; 2) use pricing structure to incentivize customers to purchase healthy items; 3) use marketing techniques to promote healthy foods; 4) use benefit design and/or wellness incentives to encourage behavior change; and 5) implement education campaign to promote the healthy food environment with staff and visitors. While meeting these standards, the best estimate was that less than 40% of foods and beverages sold on the Vidant campuses were “healthy”. To ensure that the healthy choice was the easy choice for employees and visitors, more needed to be done. The Nutrition Initiative committee determined it would not be feasible at this time to ensure that most foods and beverages sold at onsite food venues, including vending, would meet the *Pick Well Live Well* criteria. However, it could be possible that most foods and beverages could be in healthy portion sizes of appropriate calorie levels. The NCPP program continues to evolve and is now the top achievement is a “Gold Apple”. All Vidant hospitals are working to achieve this status.

**Calories Count**

Faced with the alarming statistics that 74% of Vidant Health employees were overweight or obese (as measured at WellScreen) it was clear that more needed to be done to assist employees and visitors to the hospital campus to achieve and maintain a healthier weight. In 2010, the Nutrition Initiative proposed a Healthy Food Environment Policy with 4 key principles: 1) 75% of food and beverage options at onsite food venues meet healthy criteria; 2) 60% of food and beverages at company sponsored events meet healthy criteria; 3) price leverage healthy options and 4) label calories and servings size on all foods and beverages. This policy is in keeping with the national nutrition policy that encourages us to enjoy our food while eating less. The policy was approved and endorsed by hospital administration with a target date of January 2012 for full implementation and affected any eatery or vending on a Vidant Health campus including cafeterias, coffee shops, food carts, and vending machines.

The implementation of the policy was overseen by a Steering Committee composed of a champion appointed by each Vidant hospital’s president. Time was needed to prepare for this food environment since it’s not as simple as it might seem to calculate the caloric content of menu items and design a
method for displaying that information at point of purchase or service, and train staff to meet the requirements. To meet the policy required re-tooling of menus, finding and taste testing food products that meet the healthy criteria and prepare marketing and education materials. While there still was no how-to manual for creating a healthy food environment, the NCPP WorkHealthy America program (http://www.ncpreventionpartners.org/dnn/WorkHealthyAmerica/tabid/75/Default.aspx) had useful audit tools that were applied. Questions that emerged about interpretation of the policy during the roll out were discussed and Definitions to Support the Policy were developed by the Steering Committee.

It is important to note that the Service League of Greenville has joined the efforts to provide healthier items on their hospitality cart and in the gift shop and in the vending, coffee shop and coffee bars. The funds from these sales are returned to the hospital for projects, programs and equipment such as efforts like the McConnell-Raab Hope Lodge, the Service League of Greenville Interfaith Chapel, the service League of Greenville Inpatient Hospice, the East Carolina Heart Institute and a kid friendly lobby at Vidant Children’s Hospital.

**A CALORIE DEFINITION FOR “HEALTHY”**

A committee of dietitians, in consultation with the food service operators throughout the Vidant Health system, proposed a definition of healthy that was focused on appropriate calories for portion size of different foods. There is evidence that reducing portion sizes (or downsizing) leads to reduced caloric consumption which results in weight maintenance or weight loss (Schwartz et al, 2012). And, it is reasonable to expect that with reduced portion size a reduction in sodium, saturated fat and sugars would follow. While the Vidant policy focuses on calories, the dietitians and wellness specialists ask that all involved support the spirit of the policy which is to provide fruits, vegetables, lean meats, fish, and to use food preparation techniques that maintain the healthfulness of the foods and beverages served. The impression in eateries, vending and company sponsored events should be that healthy food and beverages predominate. This policy maintains personal choice while making it easy to “eat less” as recommended in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

**APPLICATION TO COMPANY SPONSORED EVENTS**

One of the important features of the Healthy Food Environment Policy is that it affects not only the food and beverages for sale on the hospital campus but also the food and beverages purchased using company funds. For a few years it had already been required that water and at least one healthy option would be available at company sponsored events but in January 2012 60% of food and beverages must
meet the calorie goals. This affects everything from executive, staff and Board lunches, to the employee picnic, community fund raising events, open houses, awards receptions and meetings. To facilitate these two Tool Kits were created, one for Vendors and another for Event Planners. Vendors who had provided food or beverages for Vidant hospital events were invited to attend a Webinex training, supplied a Vendor Tool Kit that outlined the policy and were invited to become a preferred Vendor. Vidant employees who place orders for food and beverages using company funds received an Event Planner Tool Kit and were invited to participate in a Webinex. As of June 2012, 9 hospital food services and 14 other vendors have taken the Pledge that makes them a preferred vendor. Some have created special menus for Vidant that make it easy for the event planner to select an appropriate menu. These toolkits are posted on the Vidant Intranet.

**CALORIE LABELING**

Section 4205 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 requires restaurants and similar retail food establishments with 20 or more locations to list calorie content information for standard menu items on restaurant menus and menu boards, including drive-through menu boards. Other nutrient information – total calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, sugars, fiber and total protein – would have to be made available in writing upon request. The Act also requires vending machine operators who own or operate 20 or more vending machines to disclose calorie content for certain items (FDA, 2010). While Vidant Health would be exempt from this regulation, the rationale to provide consumers who are eating away from home with important information as they make their food choices clearly applies to all eateries and vending on Vidant campuses and all catering.

**MAKING HEALTHY AFFORDABLE**

Inspired by the success reported by First Health of the Carolinas (CTRT, 2010) in shifting employee purchases to healthier options through a pricing incentive without losing revenue, a committee of Vidant finance officers developed a price leveraging strategy to ensure the healthy choice was the more affordable choice. It was hoped that a 25% price differential between healthy and less healthy “like” items would be substantial enough to influence purchasing behaviors toward the healthier item. For example, in the Vidant Medical Center man cafeteria a 3.5 ounce oven baked chicken breast (165
calories) costs $1.83 while 3.5 ounce fried chicken breast (270 calories) is $2.47. While it is too early to assess the impact of this policy on both the revenues of the eateries and the caloric intake of the patrons, during the first six months of implementation, a 65% increase in the purchase of healthy items was recorded for the Vidant Medical Center cafeteria and café.

**NUTRITION EDUCATION CAMPAIGN HELPS CUSTOMERS USE HEALTHY FOOD ENVIRONMENT**

Vidant Wellness programs have provided healthy nutrition messages from its inception (Figure 1). There is strong evidence that health promotion programs in the workplace are associated with reduced absenteeism, higher quality performance and productivity and lower health care costs (IOM, 2012). To ensure that the implementation of the Healthy Food Environment Policy will impact the overweight/obesity rates of Vidant employees, education is about healthy eating is critical. A team of wellness specialists and registered dietitians representing all Vidant hospitals planned a 20 month nutrition education campaign which kicked off in spring 2012. The Vidant campaign with “Calories Count” to enhance the employees’ ability and desire to use the calorie labeling in all food venues. While we don’t have a measure of the understanding Vidant Health employees have about calories, anecdotally we know that many do not know their own daily caloric needs or how to use calorie labeling. Those that have studied consumer understanding of caloric requirements find that while many people know their calorie needs, some segments of the population, more education is needed if calorie labeling is to be an effective strategy in solving the obesity crisis (Bleich and Pollack, 2010; Dietary Guidelines Alliance, 2010).

The rest of the campaign piggy backs on a USDA campaign to promote the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. And, Vidant has become a Community Partner in the USDA effort to ensure employees receive consistent and actionable messages to improve their nutritional status. (http://www.choosemyplate.gov/partnerships/communitypartnerslist.aspx). Each hospital will take leadership for the development of one of the messages. And while the message will be consistent throughout the Vidant system, the events and implementation may vary by hospital. The campaign will utilize various means communication with employees from use of electronic signs to the Intranet to table tents and posters to samplings and taste tests.
Vidant Health is In Step

In recent years several organizations including but not limited to the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the Center for Disease Control have issued calls for increased access to affordable, healthy foods in communities, worksites, and schools, and decrease access to and marketing of foods and beverages of low nutritional value, particularly to youth. As well, there is a call to provide safe, enjoyable, and accessible environments for physical activity in schools and worksites, and for transportation and recreation in communities.

In August 2010, an expert panel convened by the CDC concluded that the health section and public health have an opportunity to address the nation’s chronic disease burden and health care costs by promoting healthy hospital food environments (Wiseman et al, 2010). The panel suggested that healthy food be defined not only by nutrition standards but also by an economically and environmentally sustainable food system. It called for food policies to cover all venues including cafeterias, vending machines, snack carts and gift shops. This group also called for policy and environmental approaches to improve physical activity, breastfeeding and tobacco-free environments in hospitals. In 2012 CDC announced plans for a national campaign for hospitals to build prevention into their strategic framework to support employee, patient and community health.

The Institute of Medicine’s committee that developed the report Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention (2012) was confident that if we have strategies that can solve the obesity crisis and encourages everyone to work together at the societal level to speed progress. Vidant Health has shown a commitment to working with others to solve this complex problem in part by as the report suggests “supporting individuals’ and families’ abilities to make healthy choices where they work, learn, eat, and play”.

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### TABLE 1. UHS PICK WELL LIVE WELL – HEALTHY CHOICE CRITERIA

#### MEAL

It is recommended that eateries provided at least one Pick Well Live Well meal choice at every dining shift.

Definition: The “Featured Meal of the Day” refers to a complete plate or combination of food offered for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Typically, this includes a main dish and side item(s). To qualify, a “Meal” must include two or more of the following: fruit/vegetable, whole grain, and lean protein (i.e., skinless poultry, lean beef or pork, fish/seafood (includes salmon), tofu, beans/legumes, eggs, etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calories</th>
<th>less than 800 per meal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total fat</td>
<td>max 35% of calories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated fat</td>
<td>max 10% of calories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans fats</td>
<td>less than 0.5 grams (negligible amount)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>less than 1000 mg/meal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### SNACKS

Every snack machine and the gift shop (where applicable) should have at least 1 (more would be preferable) snack item that meets the criteria that follows. That snack should be in the vending machine in a facing that is at eye level. The snack should not be priced higher than other snacks in the machine. Items that are meal replacements (e.g., sandwiches, meal replacements bars, shakes, and yogurt) are not included in this definition. Definition: The “Snack” category refers to packaged or proportioned items such as pretzels, chips, crackers, cookies, yogurt, or quick breads/muffins.

**A Pick Well Live Well snack is defined as PER PACKAGE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calories</th>
<th>less than 200</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>max 35% calories from total sugars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fat</td>
<td>max 35% calories*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated fat</td>
<td>max 10% calories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans fat</td>
<td>less than 0.5 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>less than 480 mg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*100% nuts or seeds are EXEMPT from the fat criteria*
BEVERAGES

Water should be available at every vending location and should not be priced higher than any of the other beverages vended at that place.

Considering sugar sweetened beverages are a significant contributor to excess calories consumed, 50% of the beverages in a machine be “diet” or “reduced calorie. Recommend that both water and “diet” beverages be priced at a lower price than the full calorie beverages.

Definition: The “Beverage” category refers to all beverages sold in hospital eateries, including vending machines and gift shops.

A PICK WELL LIVE WELL BEVERAGE IS DEFINED AS: Diet soda; water and flavored water have less than 50 calories per 8 ounce serving; Unflavored skim, 1% or soy milk; 100% real fruit juice: maximum serving size of 12 oz; Sports drinks be less than 50 calories per 8 ounce serving

Additionally, flavored coffees should have no more than 100 calories per 12 ounce serving and have low or no fat additives available.
Figure 1. Historical Timeline - Employee Wellness

1980's
PCMH employee wellness – “HealthQuest”

2000
ViQuest Center in Greenville opened

2001
ViQuest Center in Ahoskie opened
Disease Case Management & medication incentive introduced

2003
ViQuest Clinic began
PCMH Nutrition Initiative began

2009
Wellness added to Strategic Framework with WellScreen metric
Nutrition and weight loss coverage added to Medical Plan
Optifast medical weight loss program began
ECHI Heart Healthy Café opened with almost all healthy foods
Pick Well, Live Well healthy icon implemented in system eateries

2010
Food Environment policy approved for 2012 implementation
  ➢ Calorie labeling
  ➢ Health foods predominate
  ➢ Price leveraging

2011
100% Vidant Hospitals Red-Apple through NC Prevention Partners
Beaufort Lifestyle Wellness Center acquired
Achieved 85% WellScreen participation

2012
Launch Food Environment Policy
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