



Life Experiences: A Journey to India to Fight Malnutrition in Children with Acute Leukemia

By Linda Arpino, MA, RD, CDN

As a registered dietitian, in addition to my private practice I have served as a consultant for the Womens, Physicians and Children's Group of Westchester's Pediatric Oncology Team for the past four years. I work with families with children undergoing chemotherapy and made rounds both in the Maria Fareri Children's Hospital at the Westchester Medical Center and infusion center where they receive treatment. It is the side effects that can impact nutritional intake and I work to help them to achieve the best nutrition they can under the circumstances.

The former chief of our team retired and returned to India to open an oncology center at the Meenakshi Mission Hospital and Research Center. He asked me to come and evaluate if anything could be done to better the children's intake there as malnutrition was high. After evaluating the food service operation with the support of the hospital dietitian's it was found that the children were fed through government funds and often were fed only 600 calories per day. In the culture, it seemed that women in general did not speak up and even nurses appeared timid to share their thoughts at rounds. The doctor was continually trying to increase their involvement while I was there. I worked up menus for each age level using the foods they had available to meet the protein, calorie and other nutrients requires for each age level. The doctor, the dietitian and I met with the Administrator at the hospital and within a day all my recommendations were made. After six months here is a letter I received from the doctor.

"You will be thrilled to know that your program of meals for the kids is one of the hallmarks of our program. I am very impressed about the kinds of meals they get; and the juices, snacks, and fruits are such a treat. And so far it is all free. No one in administration has asked me to come up with the money. Remember they pay only about Rs. 300 (about \$ 7 per day) for the small private room with common bath; and \$ 13 a day for the large private room, with private bath and a flat screen TV (also free), which is as good as our rooms in MFCR. and the meals are free. Can you imagine that? And the parents also get free three meals-- the ones you saw being distributed just outside the ward." Jay

Ironically, here in the US, my recommendations to the food service director regarding the hospital food, where I consult at remains unchanged. While calories are sufficient, nutrient rich whole grains, fruit and vegetables daily are lacking. Sweetened beverages, refined carbohydrates, sweet cereals, and overall excess sugar and fat calories instead of nutrient dense meals remains an problem in US hospitals. It is only when the administration and physicians get involved that change seems to occur.

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