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Press release

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Patients getting more choice in hospital food but NHS needs to improve nutritional care

Hospital catering services are improving, with patients having more choice and the NHS getting better at responding to their preferences. But health boards need to focus more on making sure patients get the nutritional care they need.

An Audit Scotland report published today, *Catering for patients*, says that over the past three years NHS boards have improved the level of choice in the food they give patients. They now offer a range of portion sizes, cater for differing diets such as vegetarians, vegans and people from ethnic minorities, and give patients flexibility to choose what they want to eat closer to mealtimes. NHS boards have reduced the amount of food wasted and have better information to help them control their costs.

However boards still need to do more to ensure patients get good nutritional care. Not all patients are screened for under-nutrition, which should be a priority for NHS boards. Many hospitals do not have systems to ensure the meals they provide are nutritionally balanced.

Barbara Hurst, Director of Public Reporting in Health at Audit Scotland, said:

'Hospital food is key to the nutritional care for patients, and helps them to get better. Meal times also play an important social role for patients and contribute to their wellbeing while they are in hospital.

'Scotland's health boards are providing more choice and catering for patients with different diets, but they need to do more to ensure patients are getting the nutritional care they need as a matter of priority.'

The report follows up an Audit Scotland study published in 2003 that made a number of recommendations for hospital catering in the NHS in Scotland. Today's report is based on Audit Scotland checks on 149 hospitals across 16 boards, and monitors their progress since the 2003 document. It also suggests further steps for the NHS to continue its improvements and address weaknesses.

As well as being key to the care of patients, hospital food is an area of significant spending in the NHS in Scotland. In 2004/05 the service spent £73 million on catering in hospitals and employed more than 3,000 staff to produce and serve more than 17 million meals. The report finds that catering costs have risen by third since Audit Scotland first looked at this. This increase is largely due to the impact of the Low Pay Agreement on catering staff. Whereas the costs of food and beverages per patient have remained stable and boards have reduced the amount of food wasted.

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Notes to editors

1. This report is a follow up to the 2003 report *Catering for patients*, which can be found at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/pubs2003.htm
2. Audit Scotland worked with NHS Quality Improvement Scotland to get a comprehensive picture of work in this area. The Audit Scotland report uses findings from the recent NHS QIS report on food, fluid and nutritional care in hospitals. This has reduced the burden of scrutiny on the health service.
3. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
4. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report jointly for the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland:

- The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.