

Opinion

Hospital Diversification and Alice's Restaurant?

The other day, I went looking for the cafeteria at a local hospital, only to find that they had replaced it with “Café 1910,” which was located in the shopping mall wing of the hospital next to the baby store and the Starbucks. Since hospitals are already into upscale food service, like room service for patients 24/7, I figure it's just a matter of time before they develop “satellite” gourmet restaurants, just like their satellite primary care clinics in every little wide spot in the road. Since people still associate hospital fare with airline meals and pet food, these gourmet restaurants will have engaging names, like Bistro Lyon, so you can never tell it is owned by the hospital.

According to hospital administrators, these gourmet restaurants will offer unique menus to build the elusive customer allegiance and repeat business that marketers crave. Of course, the restaurants will be subject to the same regulatory rules that apply to the hospital proper. This will lead to a new dining experience for patrons that may take a little getting used to.

“Hello, I'd like a reservation for two at 7:30 on Saturday night.”

“Just a brief interlude, sir, while I log into the system.” Pause. “Waiting for the welcome screen ... it says, ‘Please wait.’” An even longer pause. “How's your day going so far, sir? Oh, now it is asking for my password.” Click ... click. “OK, sir, we are ready to

begin. What's your universal restaurant number?”

“I don't have one. I just want a reservation for Saturday.”

“No problem. We'll enter a dummy number for now.” A few taps of the keys. “Ah, yes, we can confirm your booking for Saturday, for Mr. Dummy, at 7:30 pending receipt of your banking records. You may e-mail or fax them before your arrival at the restaurant. One more thing: Please recognize you could be bumped if hungrier patrons arrive ahead of you.”

The medic van picked us up, since parking at the restaurant is known to be impossible. It was reassuring that the van driver, maitre d', and waitstaff wore gloves and masks, and used sanitizing gel—whenever they thought somebody might be watching. At the infinitely adjustable, but quite unstable, dining table, the waiter tried repeatedly to get Epic to understand that my wife wanted extra onions on her entrée. Finally, he found a dropdown menu that had “extra scallions” on it and figured that was close enough to generic onions. I found it odd that they had metal silverware and impervious plastic plates, until I learned that they were trucked off-site to materials management for irradiation until they glowed romantically green.

But the *pièce de résistance* was dessert. In my state, Washington, we just decriminalized marijuana, so everybody orders brownies. A hospital

restaurant is uniquely positioned to provide both the THC and the TLC. You've heard of hospitalists, who take care of ICU patients, and laborists, who handle emergency C-sections. Well, we were visited by Alice, the “restaurantist,” who administered a pain history questionnaire, a chairside examination, and a diner satisfaction survey (obviously to be completed before the brownies arrived). Alice was fulfilling the requirement of a patient relationship, a history, and an examination before prescription of marijuana. It's a great way to build a gourmet restaurant business. As Arlo Guthrie sang, “You can get anything you want at Alice's restaurant.”



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR, EYENET