

PHYSICAL DISABILITY: PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS IN FEEDING AND EATING

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From infancy onwards eating becomes and remains a significant social and emotional activity (Menzies 1970). It has been suggested, by physically disabled persons and their carers, that mealtimes have the potential to be satisfying, enjoyable experiences, but that they can also be extremely distressing (Roberts 1977). The possible consequences of mealtimes, where psychosocial factors cause distress, include adverse effects on physical and mental health (Widdowson 1951).

Any educational program aimed at minimising tension and maximising the potential for mealtimes to enhance the physical and mental health of the disabled should be based on an understanding of mealtimes in institutions caring for the physically disabled.

Interviews were conducted with eight clients in a hospital ward caring for people with long-term respiratory difficulties resulting from disabling illnesses such as poliomyelitis and muscular dystrophy. Interviewees were either totally or largely dependent on others at mealtimes. All were able to speak.

Interviews took place over a period of 2 months and were open ended and informal. Notes were scrutinised for themes arising from the information offered by the interviewees. Feeding of some clients was also undertaken and observations made of ward routines.

Themes introduced by clients into interviews consistently reinforced the idea that food was an important medium for the expression of individuality and autonomy. It was also clear that institutional requirements often made it more difficult to achieve the individuality desired, as did some instances of insensitivity by carers.

Theme	No. of Clients (N=8)
1. Carers should respect wishes	6
2. Personal methods in obtaining wants	6
3. Staffing level affects choices	5
4. Staff sensitivity affects choices	6
5. Client has a preferred eating situation	4

An educational program which aims to maximise mealtime satisfaction and enjoyment for the physically dependent should include efforts to increase the skills of both carers and clients. However broader issues of institutional functioning may also need to be addressed to make the achievement of this goal more likely.

MENZIES, I.E.P. (1970). *J. Psychosom. Res.* 14: 223.

ROBERTS, E.V. (1977). In 'Mealtimes for Severely and Profoundly Handicapped Persons. New Concepts and Attitudes', p. 57, editor R. Perske. (University Park Press: Baltimore).

WIDDOWSON, E.M. (1951). *Lancet* 1: 1316.

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