Keeping Patients Safe at Mealtime

The Problem
In April 2012, a new diet—Finger Foods Safety Tray No Utensils—was implemented to address an inpatient who attempted swallowing a plastic utensil. In August 2014, the House Staff, Nursing, Nutrition and Food Service were informed of two incidents in which two psychiatric inpatients attempted to swallow plastic utensils, a behavior called “Deliberate Foreign Body Ingestion” (DFBI). DFBI in a psychiatric population typically presents in the context of psychosis, malingering, obsessive compulsive disorder, or personality disorders. It was determined that the nursing staff assigned to these patients had ordered Safety Tray, which includes plastic utensils on their meal tray. Safety Tray is a precaution indicated by Nursing on a separate screen from the diet order. However, the nurses were not aware of the option to order a Finger Foods Safety Tray No Utensils diet order. Diet orders are usually reviewed by the patient’s doctor and ordered through the Nutrition Orders. As originally designed, these were two separate orders on different screens in the hospital Provider Order Entry system.

Aim/Goal
The goal was to revise the protocol for Nursing and Food Service to ensure meals could be served safely to a patient who is at risk for swallowing non-food items on the meal tray. Policy and procedures were revised to improve patient safety and reduce patient injuries by swallowed utensils to zero for 2015.

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The Interventions
- Nutrition and Food Service determined that Finger Foods Safety Tray No Utensils diet was not a diet for nutritional reasons; it was a restriction of utensils, plasticware, and other food items that could be a safety risk to patients, including twist-ties, lids, soda cans and other disposable goods.
- Information Systems created the option to choose either Finger Foods Safety Tray No Utensils or Safety Tray on one screen—the Diet Dashboard—in Provider Order Entry for clarification for nursing staff.
- New protocol was presented to Nursing, indicating Nursing discretion to order the appropriate safety precaution for meal tray.

The Results/Progress to Date
The new Diet Dashboard Safety Tray screens went live November 2014. There have been no incident reports related to patients swallowing non-food items at meals since this diet was implemented.

Lessons Learned
Since implementation, questions continue to arise regarding the appropriate meal choices of patients ordered for Finger Foods Safety Tray No Utensils. On occasion, this precaution is ordered for patients who are unable to use utensils due to their lack of dexterity. It is important to distinguish these patients from patients who are at risk for safety reasons and to continue to communicate with partnering departments to ensure appropriate diets and precautions are ordered for each individual patient.

Next Steps/What Should Happen Next
- Revisit menu choices to ensure appropriateness
- Update Nursing Policy to be inclusive of all Safety precautions relative to meal choices
- Present to Nursing Council to review change in policy and procedures
- Monitor use of this diet to determine if other changes are needed
- Spread best practice by reviewing all nursing screens and protocols to ensure clarity among departments for diets and precautions ordered.

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