



# Perfect portions for patients

Dietitian Amanda Clark has designed an innovative program for patients in a mental health clinic struggling with unwanted weight gain. Perfect portions are good for patients, and for others as well, as Kate McDonald reports.

**A**manda Clark is perhaps best known in the nutrition and dietetics sector for her Portion Perfection weight control plan.

Launched in 2006, the plan involves visual cues to remind dieters that portion control is a fundamental element of maintaining a healthy weight.

As everyone knows, a large increase in the size of servings as well as our more sedentary lifestyle is one very important aspect of the epidemic of overweight and obesity plaguing all western countries.

“Australians are surrounded by oversized meals and king-sized packages, with point of sale promotions encouraging consumers to increase their energy intake,” Clark says. She points to obvious targets like king-sized Mars bars and other junk food, but also to the jumbo sized takeaway coffees commonly available. Twenty years ago, a 200ml coffee with full-cream milk and two sugars, affording 400 kilojoules, was the norm. Now, we can buy 470ml coffees with more than 2000 kj, five times more than two decades ago.

As part of her work helping consumers to lose weight and maintain it at a healthy level, Clark devised Portion Perfect, a set of plates, bowls and utensils that allow dieters to actually see how much food to put on their

plate. According to Clark, it has been demonstrated that choosing smaller vessels facilitates portion reduction with little effort from the consumer.

Clark distributes this plan through her Great Ideas in Nutrition practice in Coolangatta, and also provides a diet book service over the internet where she uses her expertise to evaluate which diet books are worthwhile.

She has also created a version of the Portion Perfection plan for people who have undergone gastric banding surgery or a sleeve gastrectomy.

So how did she come to devise a similar program for patients with mental health issues? Clark has been a consultant dietitian at the Currumbin Clinic on Queensland’s Gold Coast since 2000, and has had the idea in the back of her mind ever since.

In 2006, with a change of ownership, she set her idea into action. Working with the clinic’s CEO and director of nursing, Varri Mackinnon, Clark has introduced a voluntary Perfect Meals for Patients program that is achieving some excellent results.

“Patients with mental health diagnoses often have to take large and varied doses of medication, which often have side effects,” Clark says. “A common side effect is weight

gain, which can severely affect self esteem in the patient as well as contribute to a reluctance to take their medication.”

### Mood and food

The link between food and mood is very strong with some of the patients, the majority of whom suffer from anxiety and depression. There are also a number of patients at the clinic with disordered eating, those who engage in abnormal eating behaviours that do not exactly meet the classification criteria for an eating disorder but which have a negative affect on a person’s emotional, social and physical wellbeing.

“For a lot of the patients, the unintentional weight gain they often experience when they are in-patients is very difficult for them to deal with,” Clark says. “It badly affects their self-esteem.”

With many patients with mood disorders also experiencing substance misuse, there may also be years of poor nutrition to deal with as well.

“Good nutrition is closely associated with improved feelings of wellbeing,” Clark says.

“And patients may have a poor perception of what a normal amount of food to eat at



Amanda Clark

any one meal looks like. Our program provides this guidance.”

Perfect Meals for Patients is an opt-in program that has proved extremely popular with patients, and the kitchen staff have been happy to help. Clark says the whole hospital has been behind the idea, with nursing and psychological staff very supportive.

Participants are given the portion perfection plate with instructions on how to use it for their own personal weight loss and nutrition goals.

One quarter of the plate is dedicated to lean protein foods, another quarter to low GI carbohydrates and half to salad or free vegetables. There is also room for one tablespoon of low-fat sauce or dressing or one teaspoon of oil.

Meals are properly spaced out as well, with patients receiving three main meals and three snacks providing their required calorie distribution throughout the day.

A number of surveys have been carried out on the success of the program, and it seems to be working. While only 41 per

cent of in-patients take part in the program, 90 per cent are aware that it is available.

The real success has been with those who take part. Prior to the introduction of the program, 73 per cent of patients reported experiencing unwanted weight increase during their stay at the clinic. Since its introduction in 2008, only 38 per cent of participants are experiencing the same.

As many of the patients continue to be seen as day patients upon discharge, Clark is hoping to set up a survey to assess whether there is mid to long-term behaviour change. She is also planning on introducing a food, mood and exercise diary to assist patients to self-assess their eating habits and implement simple changes, and also to assess the retention of the behaviour change messages following discharge.

“We have found this program to be a valuable basis to focus our menu review aims and our nutrition education content to provide a coordinated nutrition message,” she says.

In addition to mental health clinics, Clark can see a wide application for other health services, particularly disability and long-term rehabilitation facilities. HA

robot coupe



## Dining with Dignity

Eating well means living well – that’s no secret. But this principle is all the more important when patients are recovering from illness or injury or when suffering from conditions such as dysphagia.

The challenge faced by nutritionists and chefs alike is that of preparing foods that are full of nutritional value but that can be ingested by patients with swallowing problems.

Robot Coupe commercial food machinery offers catering managers, dietitians and other professionals responsible for the nutritional intake of vulnerable patients, the practical alternative to producing specially prepared meals.

The unique capabilities of the Blender, Power Mixer and Baker Mix Planetary Mixer make it possible to produce attractive and appealing meals for those with specific dietary needs.



Contact us today for a demonstration in your own kitchen.

02 9475 0300 • [orders@robotcoupe.com.au](mailto:orders@robotcoupe.com.au)

[robotcoupe.com.au](http://robotcoupe.com.au)