“Use Nutrition and Hydration Week to tell everyone you care”

This week is Nutrition and Hydration Week. It is the third year that this focused week of activity has been held, and I’ve found myself asking: do we still need this annual event?

Let’s think about what we know about nutrition and hydration. Frequently quoted figures include that three million people in the UK are at risk of malnutrition and that the cost associated with malnutrition is above £13bn. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has identified better nutritional care as the fourth largest potential source of cost saving to the NHS. The consequences of malnutrition are well documented – greater ill health, more hospital admissions, increased risk of infection and antibiotic use, longer recovery time from surgery and illness, and increased risk of early mortality.

Little is understood about the prevalence of dehydration in the UK, but we do know it has a negative impact on older people. The Hydration for Health Alliance suggests dehydration is associated with increased mortality rates and hospital admissions and the development of various morbidities, such as constipation, impaired cognitive function, falls, orthostatic hypotension, salivary dysfunction, poor control of hyperglycaemia in diabetes, and hyperthermia.

The facts would suggest that malnutrition and dehydration pose significant risks to older people, those with long-term conditions and the acutely unwell, and that both can contribute to avoidable harm.

Given these facts, the ongoing stream of negative publicity – especially that targeted at our hospitals, the recommendations from the Francis report and the various campaigns and initiatives under way, it feels important that Nutrition and Hydration Week does continue.

For me, the key to Nutrition and Hydration Week 2014 is that it’s not about telling people what to do – it’s allowing and supporting people, teams and organisations to get involved in something that provides an opportunity to showcase their practices or to make changes to their services.

This week is your opportunity to tell everyone that nurses care about nutrition and hydration. It’s an opportunity to get your voice heard.

What can you do? The most important thing you can do is get involved. Pledge your support and make a commitment to making a difference to the people in your care. The second thing you can do is to tell the Nutrition and Hydration Week 2014 team what you are doing during the week.

The arrival of the tea trolley can be something to look forward to if you are in a hospital or a care home. Unfortunately, for patients on thickened fluids, this might not be such a positive experience.

Thickeners are used to reduce the risk of aspiration, and improve hydration in those with swallowing difficulties. However, their use makes it less likely that a drink will actually be drunk. Nursing staff often add too much thickener as, during the few minutes it takes to thicken, they keep adding more, ending up with a drink that holds onto the spoon like setting plaster.

Our innovation article on page 16 features a care home provider that carried out a survey and followed this with training to improve the accurate use of thickeners and to make them more palatable for those who need them.