



## Leading with ABC: Wide Bay's Journey to Healthier Hospital Food

**Wide Bay Hospital and Health Services has significantly improved access to nutritious food options through the successful implementation of the A Better Choice (ABC) Strategy.**

Partners in Care Together, the official charity of Wide Bay Health, plays a pivotal role in supporting local hospitals by funding initiatives that promote the health and wellbeing of patients, staff, and visitors. Under the leadership of Belinda McGowan, the café manager, and her dedicated team, the Thirst Aid Café has successfully developed and implemented innovative strategies to achieve and sustain 100% compliance with the [ABC Strategy](#).

Once ranked among the lowest-performing health services in Queensland, Wide Bay has undergone a remarkable transformation, reaching and maintaining full ABC compliance for over two years. This achievement reflects the power of strong leadership, collaborative teamwork, and a steadfast commitment to health promotion.

### Motivations, Key Contributors, and Early Steps

Belinda has played a pivotal role in the successful rollout of the ABC Strategy within the hospital café, ensuring that healthier food and drink options are available to staff, patients, and visitors. Her leadership has contributed to a noticeable shift in customer behaviour, with many increasingly choosing healthier options and embracing positive changes.

Her efforts have been strongly supported by the hospital's dietitians, who provided expert guidance in

developing 'green' meals, maintained open communication with the café team, and conducted regular check-ins to monitor progress. This collaborative approach enabled a smooth and sustainable transition to healthier offerings.

The team also recognised a growing demand for healthy choices, particularly among doctors, staff, and visitors, which helped drive the initiative forward. To embed the initiative into daily operations, Belinda incorporated the ABC Strategy into the cafés onboarding process, ensuring that every new employee understands the importance of promoting healthier eating as part of their role in a healthcare setting.

### Strategies for Implementation and Meeting Targets

To support the ABC Strategy and meet performance targets, Belinda and her team implemented a range of practical and innovative strategies. One of these was the launch of an app-based ordering system in 2021. Designed by Belinda and her team, the app prioritises 'green' items such as fresh fruit and salads, by displaying them first, subtly guiding customers toward healthier choices.

This 'green-first' approach was also reflected in the physical café layout, where healthier options were placed at eye level in fridges and display cabinets. The '[Pick me](#)' initiative further supported this strategy by using clear, visible labeling to highlight healthier choices. Evaluations of the campaign suggested that increasing the variety and affordability of healthy items, along with strategic placement in high-traffic areas, would further encourage positive customer behaviour.

To streamline menu planning and ensure alignment with ABC targets, Belinda used the [FoodChecker](#) tool to

# A Better Choice

Healthy options made easy



classify menu items and identify opportunities to replace 'red' and 'amber' foods with healthier alternatives. Strong relationships with suppliers were instrumental in this process. When changes were needed, suppliers responded promptly, allowing the team to make adjustments without disrupting inventory or service.

## Outcomes, Feedback and Challenges

Customer feedback has been a valuable driver in the ongoing development of the café. Belinda and her team actively engage directly with customers to gather insights, build rapport, and educate them about healthier food and drink options. This proactive approach has strengthened relationships and led to meaningful improvements in the café environment.

One of the key challenges during implementation was replacing popular 'red' food items. With support from dietitians and suppliers, the team removed all red prepackaged snacks from displays, reduced cake and sweet lines, and made salads, wraps, and sandwiches the focus of their cold cabinet. They swapped cheeses for low-fat options, switched to low-fat yoghurt in yoghurt-and-muesli pots, offered lower fat, salt, and sugar sauces—or removed sauces altogether—to create healthier, "green" choices.

To support these changes Belinda and the dietitians provided clear, accessible information on the health benefits of the ABC Strategy. Over time, customer attitudes shifted, and many began regularly choosing healthier options. The implementation of the ABC Strategy has led to a noticeable and positive shift in purchasing behaviour.

As healthier options were introduced, customers gradually adjusted their habits, and these choices have now become part of the cafés everyday culture. Importantly, the café has maintained steady sales throughout the transition, demonstrating that with the right approach, creating a healthier food environment can be both sustainable and well-received.

## Lessons Learned and Future Plans

A key lesson from Wide Bay's experience is the importance of strong supplier relationships. These partnerships have enabled the café team to consistently meet ABC targets while maintaining a high-quality range of food. Belinda recommends that other hospitals begin their ABC journey by focusing on beverages, which are often easier to manage and provide a practical starting point for gradual change.

Another critical insight is the value of staff education. By embedding ABC principles into the onboarding process, the team has cultivated a strong understanding of their role in promoting healthier choices. This has helped sustain the changes and ensure that health-promoting practices remain embedded in daily operations.

The success of the ABC Strategy at Wide Bay Hospital and Health Service is a testament to the exceptional teamwork and dedication of its staff. Their collective efforts have led to improved health outcomes, transformed customer habits, and set a high benchmark for other health services to follow.

**Wide Bay received two A Better Choice Healthcare Awards for Excellence at the A Better Choice Conference 2025.**



*Wide Bay Awarded for Excellence*

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