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An organic produce stand operated by Full Circle Farm draws eager customers outside the cafeteria at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle. The stand is available once a month. (Paul Joseph Brown / P-I)

Hospital jumps on the farm-fresh bandwagon

Growing call seen for this type of food

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Under a tent outside Children's Hospital in Seattle, employees and patients' families paw through fancy potato fingerlings, candy-striped beets and Purple Rain eggplant.

In June, a Snoqualmie Valley farm began offering a tantalizing new market of organic, locally grown produce. At first, one woman had trouble rolling her baby's intravenous drip over the grass. So they moved the farmers market closer to the cafeteria.

It's the kind of relationship-building exercise some hope can forge new links between local farms and institutional cafeterias.

Hospitals have several advantages over schools: Budgets aren't as tight and they operate during the productive summer farm season. But they still face many of the same barriers.

Walter Bronowitz, executive chef for Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center, features special organic vegetables from Full Circle Farm on his menu on market days.

But to make orange-braised rainbow chard, he has to bring in an extra cook. His kitchen doesn't have the space to cut and prep farm-fresh produce every day.

A planned hospital expansion would make it possible for Bronowitz to use more local growers.

"Most of the time I'm using precut vegetables because that's the only way I can survive," he said. "Right now, my cooks don't have time to do anything but open the bag."

Tom French, a chef who's worked on a similar partnership between farms and Island Hospital in Anacortes, said a re-education process has to occur in institutional kitchens.

But hospitals see a future onslaught of baby boomer patients with sophisticated palates and an interest in healthy eating.

"When you look at hospital magazines, the whole thrust is wellness," French said. "It's not lost on us, and people in the industry absolutely recognize this will be a trend."

Farm-to-health care partnerships have focused largely on offering farmers markets and employee subscriptions for produce deliveries through Community Supported Agriculture programs.

Full Circle Farm -- which pulls from organic growers across the state -- has worked with Regence Blue Shield insurers and has a CSA pickup site at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

Its goal, said owner Andrew Stout, is to bring "healthy, local food into your workplace, your community, your institution in any way, shape or form."

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