

The case of the disappearing teaspoons: longitudinal cohort study of the displacement of teaspoons in an Australian research institute

Megan S C Lim, Margaret E Hellard, Campbell K Aitken

Centre for
Epidemiology and
Population Health
Research,
Macfarlane Burnet
Institute for Medical
Research and
Public Health,
GPO box 2284,
Melbourne,
Victoria, 3001,
Australia

Megan S C Lim
research assistant
Margaret E Hellard
director

Campbell K Aitken
senior research officer

Correspondence to:
C K Aitken
aitken@burnet.edu.au

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Abstract

Objectives To determine the overall rate of loss of workplace teaspoons and whether attrition and displacement are correlated with the relative value of the teaspoons or type of tearoom.

Design Longitudinal cohort study.

Setting Research institute employing about 140 people.

Subjects 70 discreetly numbered teaspoons placed in tearooms around the institute and observed weekly over five months.

Main outcome measures Incidence of teaspoon loss per 100 teaspoon years and teaspoon half life.

Results 56 (80%) of the 70 teaspoons disappeared during the study. The half life of the teaspoons was 81 days. The half life of teaspoons in communal tearooms (42 days) was significantly shorter than for those in rooms associated with particular research groups (77 days). The rate of loss was not influenced by the teaspoons' value. The incidence of teaspoon loss over the period of observation was 360.62 per 100 teaspoon years. At this rate, an estimated 250 teaspoons would need to be purchased annually to maintain a practical institute-wide population of 70 teaspoons.

Conclusions The loss of workplace teaspoons was rapid, showing that their availability, and hence office culture in general, is constantly threatened.

Introduction

In January 2004 the authors found their tearoom bereft of teaspoons. Although a flunky (MSCL) was rapidly dispatched to purchase a new batch, these replacements in turn disappeared within a few months. Exasperated by our consequent inability to stir in our sugar and to accurately dispense instant coffee, we decided to respond in time honoured epidemiologists' fashion and measure the phenomenon.

A search of the medical and other scientific literature through Google, Google Scholar, and Medline using the keywords "teaspoon", "spoon", "workplace", "loss" and "attrition" revealed nothing about the phenomenon of teaspoon loss. Lacking any guidance from previous researchers, we set out to answer the age old question "Where have all the bloody teaspoons gone?" We aimed to determine the overall rate of loss of teaspoons and the half life of teaspoons in our institute, whether teaspoons placed in communal tearooms were lost at a different rate from teaspoons placed in individual tearooms, and whether better quality teaspoons would be more attractive to spoon shifters or be more highly valued and respected and therefore move and disappear more slowly.

Methods

The Macfarlane Burnet Institute for Medical Research and Public Health (Burnet Institute) based in Melbourne, employs about 140 people. The institute has eight tearooms; four are "programme linked"—that is, predominantly used by the staff of a single programme—and four are communal: two are attached to formal meeting rooms, one is a large multipurpose staff room, and one is a rather barren corridor with kitchen facilities.

Pilot study


Between 5 February 2004 and 18 June 2004 we carried out a pilot study to gain an initial impression of the manner of teaspoon loss at the institute and to refine our methods for the full study. We purchased 32 plain stainless steel teaspoons, discreetly numbered with red nail polish on the undersides of the handles, and distributed into a subset of the eight tearooms: 16 in the programme linked tearooms and 16 in the communal tearooms. We carried out a weekly audit over five months to assess any changes in the distribution of the teaspoons throughout the institute.

Main study

At the completion of the pilot study we carried out a longitudinal cohort study. We purchased and numbered a further 54 stainless steel teaspoons. In addition we purchased and discreetly numbered 16 teaspoons of higher quality. The teaspoons were distributed (stratified by spoon type) throughout the eight tearooms, with a higher proportion allocated to those tearooms with the highest teaspoon losses in the pilot study.

We carried out counts of the teaspoons weekly for two months then fortnightly for a further three months. Desktops and other immediately visible surfaces were scanned for errant spoons.

After five months we revealed our previously covert research project to the institute's staff. They were asked to return or anonymously report any marked teaspoons that had made their way into desk drawers or homes. Two days after the revelation, staff were asked to complete a brief anonymous questionnaire, which dealt with their attitudes towards and knowledge of teaspoons and teaspoon theft.

 Details of the statistical analysis and study limitations are on bmj.com